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RETRIBUTION RANGE
A WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

AUG. 1948

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

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Retribution Range

A Wayne Morgan Novel
By GUNNISON STEELE

In This Issue:

INJUN HATE

A Frontier Novelet
By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

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Vol. XXIV, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION August, 1948

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Retribution Range

by Gunnison Steele

A wealthy rancher's mysterious death, and an odd will, bring the ready guns of Wayne Morgan to Silvertop! The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk battle against grim desperadoes! 9

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Sometimes I wonder if we fully appreciate the hardships and dangers encountered by the brave pioneers who trod those early day trails of the West, or who blazed them, who fought so valiantly that civilization could follow along those trails.

Today we are going to take a trail southward and westward, down to that section of country that the Federal government set aside for the five civilized tribes of Indians and called Oklahoma and Indian Territory, and as we ride we will talk about a grand man who did much toward the building of a great empire in the Indian country.

He's long since gone on to his last reward, but I am very proud of the fact that I knew him and called him my friend, and I believe that he numbered me among his friends although I was just a young man when I first knew him.

To Build a Home

He was Jacob H. Bartles. The town of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, is named for him and it was founded fifty-four years ago. It was then and still is right in the heart of the Indian country and that country is rich, rich in oil, rich in agriculture, a veritable paradise for cattlemen. It is also rich in legends and tales of brave pioneers.

Jacob Bartles lived in Kansas, which at the time, 1869, was Frontier country itself, but he wanted to go further into the wild country and so traveled down to the northern part of the Indian Territory. He had just started out looking for a suitable place to build a home, a home for himself and family, a home for the future.

He camped one night upon the banks of the little stream called the Caney River. He viewed that section of country before sundown and knew that it was rich, knew that if a man lived there and worked hard he could build a home. It was a land of plenty, good soil, good timber, just the kind of a place for a man who really wanted to work for what he got, and while it was a wild country and had its outlaws and gunmen, still a man who attended strictly to his own business had a chance to survive.

Six-Gun Justice

But with strict attention to his own business a man must also be armed and ready to meet fire with fire if it was forced upon him, for the six-gun was the principal weapon for enforcing justice.

So struck was Jacob Bartles with the natural resources of that section of country that he remained, and built a frontier trading post, or store, just a few feet from where he had camped. That was long before the steel rails of progress had penetrated this virgin territory. It was during the days when Caldwell, and Dodge City, in Kansas, and Deadwood in South Dakota, were having a "man for breakfast every morning."

This "man for breakfast" phrase was coined because in those wild Frontier towns it was usually at the breakfast table that

news was spread of the killings of the night before, and there was seldom a breakfast without the news that there had been a killing, perhaps another body to repose in "boot-hill."

A Time for Strength

That was a time when weaklings could hardly exist in this country. Strong men were required to pioneer this land. But Jacob Bartles was a strong man. That was during the day of the Bender Family and Indian Territory outlaws. It was the day of the survival of the fittest—the strong men stayed and conquered the wilderness, and the weaklings were lost in the turmoil.

Bartles was an intermarried citizen of the Cherokee nation. That fact may have had something to do with his locating where he did, on the extreme Western border of the Cherokees' settled lands at that time. Here and there, far between, were scattered a few white people, some refugees from the laws of the states, isolated cattlemen, Cherokee and Delaware Indians, and to the west of them the Osages, at that time doing little other than eking out a paltry existence, more by acts of Providence than efforts of their own. Of course, none of the Osages or anyone else, for that matter, at that time, ever dreamed that the Osages through the discovery of oil underneath their lands years later, were destined to become the richest nation of the world.

While Jacob Bartles might have been called a cattleman, he was a farmer at heart and liked the idea of making the soil produce food for human consumption. Seeing the advantages of agriculture in that section, he planted wheat. The first sod crop was successful and the next year it was bounteous. It was then that he enlarged his acreage, furnished seed to his less fortunate neighbors, and induced them to begin following agricultural pursuits.

The result was that within a few years the whole countryside became a waving field of golden grain. Bartles planted and harvested the first wheat for commercial purposes in the present state of Oklahoma, and one year his personal yield was in excess of forty-five thousand bushels.

It was then that Bartles constructed the first flouring mill in Oklahoma. That was in 1877 and the location of the mill was on the banks of the Caney, and in a few years

(Continued on page 105)

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A wealthy rancher's mystery death and a strange will bring the ready guns of Wayne Morgan to Silvertop!

by GUNNISON STEELE

RETRIBUTION RANGE

CHAPTER I: *Fiery Death*

OLD "JERICHO" JENKINS had spotted the smoke soon after leaving his wild horse camp back in the foothills of Silvertip Basin. Jericho, a lanky, slab-bodied little oldster in greasy buckskins, and with a tobacco-stained longhorn mustache that bobbed up and down, squinted thoughtfully at the spiral of smoke as he rode along.

"Ain't a brush fire, 'cause it stays still," he muttered. "Likely a house or barn—only there ain't no ranch in that direction. Le's see, now—"

Jericho spat amber juice with deadly

accuracy at a scuttling lizard, scratching his bald head as he studied the smoke. He knew the seriousness of a range fire. He was riding across the vast acres of Cash Border's big Anvil outfit toward the town of Monument. His camp was on Anvil land, Cash Borders having hired him to clean out the wild mustangs that were causing so much trouble.

Borders was a big, bluff man who drank an enormous amount of whisky. He owned a lot of land, a lot of cattle, a lot of money. He was Jericho Jenkins' friend.

"Just about at the foot of Wolf Canyon over on Williwaw Creek," Jericho grunted, and suddenly jerked his cayuse to a halt. "By thunder and Hannah, that's it! Anvil's got a line cabin there, and she's burnin'!"

The old horse hunter stared a moment longer, his bony, bearded jaws working rhythmically. The smoke was approximately a mile away, beyond several belts of dense timber that laced darkly through the broad meadows of Silvertip Basin.

"I gonnies, I aim to have me a looksee!"

Jericho wheeled his cayuse suddenly and raced across the meadow he had been traversing. He shot into a belt of timber, swaying expertly to avoid low branches, swearing luridly as thorny twigs slapped him in the leathery face. He shot out of the timber and into another meadow that was laced by a small stream that was like a silver thread twisting across dark fabric.

The smoke was much closer now, and he could see a thin red finger of flame reaching upward.

"She's a-burnin' purty," Jericho muttered. "But what could have started her to poppin'?"

HE REACHED another and larger stream — Williwaw Creek — raced along its bank for a hundred yards, and emerged abruptly into a timber-hemmed clearing that was perhaps fifty yards across. At the far side of the clearing, backed up against towering black cliffs, was a fiercely blazing cabin which Jericho knew to be one of Cash Borders' line shacks.

Heat slapped Jericho in the face when he was halfway across the clearing, and he halted his cayuse. He wrenched off a fresh jawful from his plug and shook his head.

"She's shore a goner! A-blazin' from stem to stern and the roof fallin' in." Abruptly his long jaw dropped in stunned amazement. "Now what in blue-blazin' tarnation!"

At the edge of the clearing near the creek was a pole corral, and inside the corral was a horse! A saddle straddled the top pole, a bridle dangled from a post. The horse, a big black gelding, was racing about the narrow enclosure.

Jericho rode over to the corral and tumbled to the ground.

"That's Cash Borders' black!" he mumbled excitedly. "Now, I wonder what he's doin'—"

He broke off, staring at something on the ground between the corral and the blazing cabin. He stumbled forward and picked the thing up. It was a battered gray hat. On the ground ten feet from the hat lay a half-emptied whisky bottle.

Realization slammed at Jericho Jenkins like a mauling fist.

"Cash's hoss, his J. B.—and that red eye bottle on the ground clinches it! Waugh!"

He wheeled suddenly and ran toward the burning cabin, stumbling with the awkwardness of a man accustomed to the saddle. A portion of the roof caved in with a crash, showering sparks upward, billowing out a gust of heat. Jericho threw up an arm to protect his face, and plunged on.

The writhing flames reached greedily upward, crackling and hissing. The heat beat outward, stronger and stronger pressing like giant hands upon old Jericho Jenkins. He gasped and choked but bored doggedly in, convinced that his friend Cash Borders was in that flaming pyre.

He staggered up to within ten feet of the cabin's front, and only door. The door was closed, with red tentacles already twisting through and about it. The

fire was a bellowing, hammering, wicked thing.

Jericho saw it was no use. Swearing with a dismal bitterness, he backed away from the red monster, then turned and stumbled toward his horse. His whiskers singed, his face blistered, he pulled himself into saddle, wheeled out of the clearing and rode fast toward Monument. . . .

WAYNE MORGAN

In the Cattle King Saloon in Monument, four men were playing stud poker. The stakes were reasonably high, the game pleasant enough. Perhaps a dozen other men were in the Cattle King, with most of them gathered about the poker table. This was the town's favorite gathering and drinking place.

One of the players raked in a pot, and his jolly laugh filled the room. He was a huge man, with layers of flesh overflowing his chair, with a fat, florid face and twinkling, birdlike eyes. This was Stone Cady—Blackstone Jefferson Cady—the town undertaker, who liked to laugh and play the harmonica and tell tall tales.

Now Cady, fishing in a pocket, hauled out a harmonica and rollicked through several bars of "Buffalo Gals."

"Reminds me of a huntin' trip I took over in Wyoming one time," he grinned.

The other players glanced at each other. One of them was Ben Dura, handsome, dark-faced Anvil foreman, who had a reputation for toughness and driving ambition. Another was "Doc" Wind, a bald, spectacled little oldster with a goatee and paunch. Still another was a blocky rancher named Gunderson.

"Now why," Ben Dura asked, "would it remind yuh of a huntin' trip in Wyomin'?"

"On this huntin' trip," the undertaker said blandly, "a grizzly got into my supplies and left me without grub. I was pretty hungry, so I got my gun and went out to look for some elk I'd seen a couple of days before. I found one of 'em, a big bull, and managed to get within fifty

yards of him. I lined my sights on the critter, and fired. Nothin' happened—he didn't even glance at me. I fired again, and kept on firin' till I'd emptied my rifle at that elk.

"He just kept right on grazin'. Well, sir, that made me so cussed mad I jumped up and charged straight at the elk, aimin' to slub the danged critter to death. I hadn't gone more'n ten steps when I slammed into somethin' that knocked me cold. When I come to, an hour later, the elk was still grazin' away."

CADY paused, stacking his money.

"What had happened?" Dura asked curiously.

"Why"—Stone Cady looked solemnly about—"I found I'd bumped into an invisible mountain. The mountain was made of telescope glass, and the elk that had seemed so close was nearly ten miles away!"

The spectators guffawed, all except Dura, who scowled impatiently.

"Yore deal, Doc!" he growled. "This is a poker game, played for money, and I don't savvy the need of havin' to listen to a lot of blasted hogwash!"

"Yur meanin' to insinuate my word's not good?" Cady complained.

"Play poker!" Dura snapped.

The game went on, with luck shifting back and forth across the table. Cady's mood remained evenly good. Gunderson and Doc Wind played quietly, efficiently. Ben Dura played each hand, no matter how small, with a silent, wolfish intensity.

A lot of folks didn't understand how the Anvil foreman could spend so much time playing poker, although the entire Basin knew that he was efficient and tough and ambitious, that his cow knowledge had made money for the Anvil during the few years he had been its foreman. They knew that Cash Borders, a bachelor, depended on Dura a lot, for Borders although a generous and well-liked man, had to have somebody dependable. He was aging, and he stayed drunk a lot of the time.

Dura was quick-tempered, deadly with gun or fists, but nobody had ever accused him of being dishonest—at least, not to his face.

Blackstone Jefferson Cady bet fifty dollars on aces and jacks, called Ben Dura's hundred-dollar raise, and looked dolefully at Dura's three queens.

"Way I played that hand," he groaned, "reminds me of a hound dog I once owned."

Dura, his temper softened by the win, grinned and winked at the spectators.

"Might be interestin' to hear," he invited.

"This dog," the undertaker declared, " had an accident. One day while he was watchin' me chop wood, my ax slipped and sliced the fool critter straight down the middle, from nose to tail. It kind of scared me, so I grabbed up the two halves and clapped 'em back together. They'd done growed back together before I noticed that one half was stuck on upside down. Made him look powerful queer but it worked all right. When that fool hound got tired runnin' on one pair of legs, he just flopped over and run on the fresh pair while the others were restin'! Yes, sir, yuh might say it was better that—"

Cady's story ended abruptly there, for at that instant the batwings flapped violently open, letting in the skinny, buckskin-clad figure of Jericho Jenkins. Excitement made Jericho's mustaches bounce, it made his squinty eyes smoky.

He peered about the room, and yelled:

"You rannihans better come a-runnin'! Anvil's line shack over on Williwaw Creek's burnin', and I think Cash Borders is in it!"

CHAPTER II

Man of Mystery

SHOCKED silence held the room. Then Ben Dura slammed back his chair and got to his feet.

"How yuh know that?" he rapped out harshly.

"I seen it!"

"Yuh saw Cash Borders?"

"No—I seen the shack ablaze. But Cash's black was in the corral, and Cash's hat was there on the ground, alongside a whisky bottle!"

Suddenly a man stepped forward, seized the front of Jericho's greasy shirt and shook the old fellow roughly. He had

The Robin Hood Rider braced himself and leaped, his cape billowing outward (CHAP. XI)

been there among the spectators watching the game—a tall, tawny-haired young man with glacier-cold blue eyes and a ragged scar twisting across one cheek that gave his hawkish face an evil look.

This scar-faced young gent had appeared in the basin a couple of weeks ago, calling himself Dan Tabor. Since then he had been hanging out with Clay Rand—a drunken, surly customer with a bad reputation and who owned a run-down little outfit north of town. Tabor also had been seen with Rand's pretty step daughter, Sue Worth.

"If yuh figgered Cash Borders was inside, why didn't yuh go in and get him?" Tabor demanded sharply.

Jericho wriggled helplessly in the man's grasp.

"I couldn't, dag-nab it!" he blared. "It was afire all over when I got there, the roof fallin' in. Leggo me, cuss yuh!"

Tabor snapped, "If yuh're lyin'—"

"Turn him loose, Tabor!" Dura ordered coldly. "What makes yuh think he's lyin'—and what business is it of yores, anyway?"

The scar-faced man released Jericho and stepped back. He glared challengingly at Ben Dura, hand hovering near the black-handled six-shooter he wore thonged to his thigh—and every man in the room knew that, whatever he was, this scar-faced stranger was as deadly and dangerous as a panther. Dura realized it, and he faced the man with a sharpened wariness.

Abruptly Tabor's truculence vanished.

"Sorry," he murmured. "I reckon it *ain't* any of my business."

"Forget it," Dura said. "Jericho, are yuh sure the hoss and hat yuh saw belonged to Cash?"

" 'Course I'm shore! Why yuh standin' there? Why ain't yuh poundin' leather out there?"

"There's no hurry," Dura said slowly, his face taut and gray. "If Cash was inside the cabin he's long since dead. I'd like some of yuh to ride with me. Somebody get Sheriff Jacks. . . ."

A dozen men rode out of Monument, headed for the line camp on Williwaw Creek. Among them were Ben Dura, Stone Cady, Dan Tabor and Sheriff Lute Jacks. They rode at a moderate pace, knowing, as Dura had said, that there was no hurry.

Sheriff Jacks was a thick-bodied man with dull eyes and a broad, heavy-boned face. He was a conscientious servant of the law, although not overly brilliant, a slow, plodding man with his own dogged convictions and beliefs.

Dan Tabor had come along unasked. He rode his hammer-headed roan inconspicuously at the rear of the cavalcade, icy eyes looking straight ahead, giving no sign that he was aware of the fact that Dura turned in his saddle occasionally to stare back at him suspiciously. He rode with an easy grace, a powerful, tough-looking man made more so by the scar that distorted his features.

Stone Cady, for once, neither played his harmonica nor cracked any jokes. The small cavalcade rode in silence for the most part.

When they reached Williwaw Creek, they soon emerged into the timber-hemmed clearing where the line shack had stood. The cabin now was a mass of smoking, smoldering ruins. The riders drew to a halt, still-faced, silent.

"I told yuh so!" old Jericho shrilled. "There's Cash's hoss in the corral, and his hat on the ground, like I said!"

"Cash's black, all right, and his hat," Sheriff Jacks said grimly. "Let's have a look-see at the cabin."

They trudged up as closely as they could to the wreckage, for it still smoldered, and tiny red fingers of flame were licking up here and there. It was mostly ashes and the charred, smoking remnants of rafters and planks. A sheet-iron stove lay on its side, its flattened pipes scattered about it.

"Look—there beside the stove!" a puncher exclaimed, in an awed voice. "Ain't that—"

IT was, they saw instantly, the charred, grotesquely twisted body of a man. A long, dismal sigh went through the group, and some of them turned away. Dura swore bitterly.

"No doubt about it, I reckon," Stone Cady said. "Cash Borders was a mighty fine man, and my friend. This'll be the worst job I ever had."

Until now Dan Tabor had remained silent, but now he spoke up.

"It's a man," he said flatly, "but there's

no proof it's Cash Borders! A saddle-drifter might have bedded down here."

All eyes were turned on Tabor, as men were jolted by his vehemence. Tabor glared back defiantly.

"It's Cash Borders, all right, and I hate it more than anybody," Ben Dura declared. "That's his hoss in the corral, his hat on the ground. That's the brand of whisky he always drank, there in that bottle. If that's not enough, Cash told me before he left the ranch this mornin' he was ridin' over this way and aimed to bed down in this line shack tonight."

"It took yuh a long time to mention that!"

"I thought Jericho might be mistaken, and I wanted to be shore before I said anything. Cash was pretty drunk, even early this mornin' when he left the ranch, and I figgered what he done wasn't anybody else's business."

"Just the same," Tabor growled, "somethin' about this deal smells to me!"

"Nobody gives a cuss how it looks to you, Mr. Tabor—if that's yore name!" Dura snapped. "Seems to me yuh're takin' a powerful big interest in this, for a saddle bum. Yuh ain't been in such good company since showin up here a couple of weeks ago, either."

"Meanin' what, Dura?" Tabor asked coldly.

"Meanin' Clay Rand and his hellcat stepdaughter Sue Worth! Everybody knows Rand is a hootch-guzzlin' thief, and I don't reckon the girl's any better. Any jigger that holes up with them is bound to have the same smell!"

Dan Tabor's powerful shoulders bunched a little, and the ragged scar on his face seemed to go white. His blue eyes, already ice-cold, went rash and wholly wicked, and the corners of his thin lips curled downward.

"Dura," he said softly, "yuh're a dirty, cowardly liar! Put yore filthy tongue on that girl ag'in and I'll kill yuh like the dog yuh are!"

Tension gripped the party like a clutching hand. Death fluttered from the shadowy timber and hovered on dark and silent wings over the group.

There was a quick scuffing of feet as men moved out of line of fire, and the quick hiss of indrawn breaths was plain to be heard. None of the men had ever heard anybody talk like that to Ben Dura before. Dura stood stone-still, puzzlement touching the cold, dark mask of his face as he stared at the scar-faced stranger. Sheriff Jacks had been watching this, and deliberately stepped in between the two men.

"Shut up, both of yuh!" he ordered flatly. "A man lies dead there in the ashes. If there's another killin' here, I swear I'll hang the man that does it!"

The tension held a moment longer. Then Dan Tabor shrugged, turned away.

"It's Cash Borders, all right," Stone Cady said, and he took his harmonica from his pocket.

He played several bars from the *Cowboy's Lament,* the notes floating out sweet and clear over the clearing, while the range-men gathered there removed their hats and stood in silent tribute.

"So far as I know," said the sheriff, "Cash didn't have no kin to take over the Anvil, since his son Dan died."

Young Dan Borders, as all of them knew, had been an only child, and had therefore been pampered and spoiled by Cash Borders. The boy's buck-wildness, as he grew to young manhood, had been a natural result. He had drunk and gambled and got in with a bad crowd. Finally, six years ago, at the age of eighteen, he had got into what looked like serious trouble.

Dan Borders had fled the basin one stormy night and had never returned. From various places tales of his wild escapades had drifted back to Silvertip Basin, and finally, from Texas, news of his death. That news, more than anything else, had started Cash Borders on his own wild, morose drinking sprees.

"Way I see it," Sheriff Jacks theorized heavily, "is that Cash got a little too drunk. He kindled a fire in the stove, likely aimin' to cook him somethin' to eat. Mebbe some coals dropped on the floor, mebbe Cash fell over the stove and knocked it over, and when the shack caught fire he was too drunk to get out. We'll never know. No more'n we know who'll inherit Cash's land and cattle and money."

"I think I can answer that," Ben Dura said slowly. "Cash made a new will a month ago. It's in his safe at the ranchhouse."

"And I reckon he left everything to you," Dan Tabor sneered.

DURA shot a half-startled glance at Tabor.

"As a matter of fact, drifter, he did! And he was sober when he did it. I didn't like the idea, and said so. But Cash claimed, since Dan was dead, he didn't have any kin, and he didn't want a lot of squabblin' over his property after he was gone. He said, seein' as how I had took care of him and his ranch durin' the last ten years, he wanted me to have it when he died."

A moment of thin silence followed Ben Dura's announcement. Dura's careful gaze traveled slowly over the faces about him, as if trying to gauge the reactions of the men. Cash Borders' holdings were worth a vast sum of money, a ripe plum to fall into anybody's hands.

"Yuh got witnesses to that will?" the sheriff asked bluntly.

"Two of 'em," Dura said, his lips quirking sardonically. "If any man doubts my word, ask Stone Cady."

The fat undertaker nodded ponderously.

"It's a fact," he declared. "The drawin' up and signin' of that will was witnessed by me and Al Caspin, out at the Anvil one day. Like Ben says, Cash was sober and in his right mind. Made no difference to me—I was just asked to be a witness."

"And that's how she lays," Dura declared. "Makin' the will was Cash's own idea."

"Dura"—Dan Tabor's voice was flat and harsh—"I still say yuh're a dirty, cowardly liar! Cash Borders didn't make no such will!"

Dura wheeled. "Drifter," he said savagely, "I've taken all yore tongue I aim to!"

He leaped cougarlike at the scar-faced man, fists flailing.

Dan Tabor jumped to meet him, and they came together with a solid, jarring crash. Dura smashed a fist into Tabor's face. Tabor laughed sneeringly, lifted a knee deliberately and speared it into Dura's stomach. Pain made an ugly pattern over Dura's face, and he reeled backward.

Tabor leaped after him, stalking him like a panther, driving savage, chopping blows into Dura's dark face. Dura continued to reel backward, cursing furiously, his boot heels hammering the hard earth as he fought to stand against that fierce onslaught.

Tabor came in after him, laughing wickedly, walking on the balls of his feet.

It had happened so suddenly that the other men for a moment stood as if paralyzed. Then sheriff Jacks collected his wits. He grabbed out his gun and ran at the fighters.

"Stop it, cuss yuh," he bellowed, "or I'll let daylight through both of yuh!"

Tabor stepped back instantly, that mirthless grin still curling his lips. Dura stood swaying on unsteady legs, wiping blood from smashed lips.

"Drifter," Dura said softly, carefully, "I'll kill yuh for this!"

"Not here, yuh won't!" Sheriff Jacks barked, brandishing his pistol. "By gosh, I aim to get to the bottom of this. Tabor, yore lip's been floppin' a lot. Yuh say Cash Borders didn't will his property to Ben Dura. Why?"

"Because," the scar-faced man said slowly, "if he'd made a will he would have left everything to me. Yuh see, my name's not Dan Tabor—it's Dan Borders!"

CHAPTER III

Prisoner

JAWS dropped. Every man stood rooted to the spot, staring with shocked surprise at the tall drifter. Then their shock gave way to open disbelief.

Dura recovered first. "Just what kind of funny game is this, drifter?" he sneered. "Dan Borders is dead!"

"I may look dead, but I'm not! I'm Cash Borders' son. I left here six years ago, thinkin' I'd killed a man named Sid Parrot. Later, I found out Parrot didn't die, but by then driftin' had got to be kind of a habit. But here I am now—just a little too late to save Cash's life!"

Sheriff Jacks lumbered forward and planted himself belligerently before the tall man.

"Stranger," he rumbled, "it's me that's

saying yuh a liar now! I know all about Dan Borders runnin' off thinkin' he had killed Sid Parrot in a drunken brawl. I heard some other things about him, too, after he lit a shuck. One was that he'd tumbled into a canyon, down in the Texas Big Bend, and been killed!"

Dan nodded, grinning crookedly.

"Me and my bronc fell into a canyon, all right, and landed in a river. My bronc died, but I didn't, though I was as much dead as alive when I'd swam through that canyon. Searchers found my hoss and hat lodged on a drift, but not me, and that's how the report got back that I was dead."

"If yuh like ghost stories," Dura jeered, "that's a good one. Yuh just sort of vanished like a puff of smoke, huh?"

"Not exactly. But fallin' into that canyon kind of gave me an idea. I still thought I'd killed Sid Parrot, and was wanted by the law. After my hoss and hat had been found there on that drift, I thought I saw a chance to get in the clear. So I just let folks keep on thinkin' I'd died, too, and I sneaked out of the country. They found my real name and address in my warbag and sent Dad word that I was dead."

For a moment there was silence. Then a puncher snickered and the jeering laughter was taken up by others.

"It's a good story, feller," Dura repeated sneeringly. "Just one thing wrong with it. Mebbe yuh forgot I was ramroddin' the Anvil when Dan Borders left, and I know what he looked like—and you ain't him!"

"Six years can change a man a heap."

"But not that much. Dan Borders didn't have any scar on his face."

"That's a fact." The man who called himself Dan Borders hesitated, staring at the ghastly thing in the smoking debris of the cabin. Then he turned back, his lips grim. "I got that scar in a close fight with some owlhooters, down in Arizona. It didn't get the attention it should have, and it healed crooked. It changed my whole appearance, as yuh can see."

"Yeah, we can see," Sheriff Jacks mimicked, with heavy sarcasm. "If you're Dan Borders, why have yuh been prowlin' about the basin for the last couple of weeks, beddin' down with Clay Rand,

"Reach, blast you," said the girl, "or I'll blow you both apart!" (CHAP. V)

callin' yoreself Dan Tabor, instead of goin' straight to yore dad and lettin' him know yuh was back?"

"Sue Worth—" The scar-faced man paused, then shrugged. "Never mind about that. Dan Tabor is what I called myself after leavin' here. When I drifted back I decided to keep who I was a secret for a while, till I kind of looked things over. One thing in particular I didn't like"—he looked flatly at Ben Dura—"was the way this busky seemed to be roddin' the Anvil like it belonged to him."

He paused again, his eyes scanning the faces of the men hemming him in. He saw disbelief, and the heat in his own eyes grew greater and greater.

Ben Dura pushed forward.

"Bucko," he said coldly, "looks to me like yuh've got yoreself into a jackpot. Nobody's loco enough to believe that cock-and-bull story about you bein' Dan Borders. Here's what I think: It's pretty plain yuh knew Dan Borders somewheres, mebbe in Texas. Yuh found out a lot of things about his life—why he left Silvertip, and all like that. Mebbe yuh killed him, mebbe yuh just happened to be there when he died. Anyway, yuh cooked yoreself up a scheme to pass yoreself off as Dan Borders and grab onto the Anvil. Yuh been loafin' about the last couple of weeks, gettin' the lay of the land, before springin' yore little scheme. Mebbe Clay Rand and that hellcat stepdaughter Sue Worth—"

"I told yuh to keep yore tongue off her!" Dan spat out. Then he sneered, "Is that all? Yuh shore I didn't have somethin' to do with this?" He jerked his arm toward the smouldering cabin.

"I'm pretty shore you *did!*" Dura snapped. "Yuh wanted Cash Borders out of the way, because yuh knowed yuh couldn't put any crooked deal like that over on him. Sheriff, arrest this skunk and charge him with killin'!"

"Reckon I'll have to," the sheriff said heavily, waddling toward Dan. "Feller, looks like yuh've overplayed yore hand. I'm arrestin' yuh and—"

"Stand back, cuss yuh, all of yuh!" the scar-faced man suddenly snarled.

HE leaped backward, clear of the group, and with amazing speed twin long-barreled six-shooters appeared in his hands. A puncher reached recklessly for his gun.

One of the twin guns roared, and the puncher yelled and grabbed his shattered wrist.

"I'll kill the next busky that does that!" Dan said harshly. "I don't aim to be jailed. I'm Dan Borders, like I said, and I can see that somethin' plenty rotten is afoot here, but I couldn't clear it up in jail. So don't crowd me! Dura, I'll be comin' back to see yuh!"

"While yuh're danglin' from a hang-rope!" Dura shouted at him.

Dan backed to his horse, and keeping the silent group under his gun muzzles, swung into saddle. He backed the well-trained animal for thirty feet with a pressure from his knees.

"Hombre," Sheriff Jacks grumbled, "I'll track yuh down if it takes the rest of my life."

"The busky that comes after me's liable to have a mighty *short* life!" the tall rider sneered, and he blazed a couple of shots that kicked up dirt about the posse's feet.

Stone Cady yelled and tumbled backward, knocking half a dozen men off-balance. In the confusion the mounted man whirled his horse and sent it crashing into the nearby timber.

"Get after him!" Ben Dura squalled. "Don't let him get away!"

Crashing his mount recklessly through that first thin belt of timber, ignoring the branches that slapped and hammered at him, the man who insisted he was Dan Borders reached the creek. He swerved the horse sharply, sent it splashing across the stream.

Rock walls towered on the far side of of the creek. But slashing through them was a narrow opening, the dry bed of a smaller creek. Beyond those walls, the rider knew, was wild, rough country where he might elude the posse that he could hear already in full cry behind him, and lose himself.

He sent the roan clattering and clawing up a rocky incline and into the cut, lips peeled back from his teeth in a grimace of anger as he flung a glance back over his shoulder. The riders, led by Ben Dura, had already burst from the timber.

Dan wheeled back—just in time to see a lone rider spur out from a niche in one of the walls and into the narrow passage before him. The rider, mounted on a hammer-headed roan even bigger than Dan's own, was tall, powerful, with rugged bronzed features and wide lips. He was wearing levis, gray shirt and battered brown Stetson. Twin black Colts encircled his lean waist.

This rider, Dan saw, was deliberately blocking his escape route. His hand was upraised in a signal for Dan to halt.

"Get out of my way, brush-popper," Dan yelled furiously, "or I'll blow yuh apart!"

He drove his mount headlong at the other rider, spurring savagely. The tall, blue-eyed rider, he saw instantly, had no intention of budging. No more than twenty feet separated them now, with the hammering hoofs of his mount closing that distance with incredible speed.

"Cuss yuh, didn't yuh hear me?" Dan shouted, and grabbed for his gun.

But now the stranger's big roan, which had been standing rock-still, suddenly shot forward as if catapulted. The two animals came together with a smashing jar that echoed in the narrow passage.

But an instant before the collision the big cowboy had left his saddle in a lunging, headlong dive. One hand slashed for Dan's hand, already gun-filled and rising, and clamped his wrist in a steel-like grip. His shoulder mauled into Dan's chest driving him violently backward from the saddle.

They slammed against the rock wall, caromed off it and thudded to the hard earth where they rolled about on the ground, a tangled mass of arms and legs, mauling, clawing and gouging like a couple of wildcats. The scar-faced man fought savagely, trying to break loose from his antagonist, knowing the posse was almost upon them.

WHEN he did fight loose and scramble groggily to his feet, a mauling fist came out of nowhere and smashed him to the ground again. The twin-gunned, blue-eyed cowboy grabbed him by the collar and hauled him to his feet, just as the dozen riders, led by Ben Dura and Sheriff Jacks, thundered into the cut and dragged their horses to a halt.

The tall cowboy looked at them calmly, looked at the guns in their hands.

"You gents after this busky?" he drawled.

"We shore as tunket are, cowboy!" the big lawman growled. "And likely he'd have made a clean getaway if yuh hadn't stopped him. Who are yuh?"

"Name of Wayne Morgan. I heard some shots, then saw this jigger come poundin' out of the timber with you fellers after him, so I figgered he must be some kind of criminal."

"Yuh figgered right . . . Easy there, Ben!"

Ben Dura had swung from saddle, stepped in close and slammed his fist into the prisoner's face. Dan, still dazed from his fight with Morgan, reeled backward, cursing furiously.

Morgan had been too late to stop Dura, but now he whirled and his arms straightened like a ramrod, the heel of his hand catching Dura viciously under the chin. The Anvil foreman sat down abruptly, but came up swearing, and grabbed for his gun.

He found himself looking into the black muzzles of twin guns in Wayne Morgan's steady hands. He froze motionless.

"Hombre," Morgan purred, "that's one way graveyards get started. And nobody but a cowardly snake would hit a man when he's bein' held!"

Dura got up, still cursing, but the sheriff took a hand.

"Shut up, Ben," he said gruffly. "Yuh boys, some of yuh tie the prisoner up. He'll get a fair trial." The sheriff turned to Wayne Morgan. "Cowboy, I reckon yuh've got a right to know what this is all about."

CHAPTER IV

Trailmates

WAYNE MORGAN listened without comment as Sheriff Jack briefly outlined the day's events. He gave no sign that he already knew many of the particulars, that his being there in the narrow pass was not exactly an accident.

"Glad I could help," he said, when the

sheriff finished.

The prisoner, disarmed, and with his wrists bound behind him, glared at Morgan balefully.

"Cowboy," he snarled, "I ain't forgettin' this! If I ever get loose yuh'd better not be in this neck of the woods!"

Morgan shrugged, said nothing. He had, he knew, just made two enemies—the prisoner and Ben Dura. He could feel Dura's stare upon him, hot and filled with hate.

"Greed," Morgan said philosophically, "makes men do queer things."

"True, my friend," Stone Cady murmured, feeling vaguely for his harmonica. "Life is a weary walk through sunlight and dark, and who can say whether after a man dies it is all darkness or all sunlight?"

Morgan looked curiously at the fat, florid-faced undertaker. Cady smiled amiably, held out a flabby hand, which Morgan shook.

"Undertaking is my business, friend Morgan," Cady said. "I hope we meet again—in a social way, of course. I own a bunch of whisky springs over in the hills, where hundred proof pure Bourbon bubbles up out of the earth. One comes up Scotch, with a smaller one of soda water closeby. No rye, though."

"Let's catch up and ride, boys," the sheriff rumbled. "I want to get this busky behind bars. And soon as them ashes cool off some we've got to see about pore Cash. Morgan, if yuh're ever in Monument, drop in to see me."

Morgan nodded, and watched the cavalcade move out of the slash through the cliffs and back across the stream. After they had vanished in the timber, he kept remembering what had happened, placing each word and incident in its proper place. He remembered the prisoner's threat, and Ben Dura's hate-filled stare.

He shook his head. "I wonder if I could have made a mistake," he murmured.

He mounted the roan, rode out of the slash and northward through roughening country. After about twenty minutes he threw back his head and gave the low, savage cry of a mountain lion. The call was answered almost instantly from a spot fifty yards ahead.

Heading toward the ranch he rode into a camp that had been made in a little clearing beside the stream, with towering red cliffs for a backdrop. There was a small tent, with camping gear scattered over the soft ground, while in a thicket-hemmed grass patch nearby three horses grazed. Among them was a magnificent black stallion.

Bending over the campfire that blazed at the base of the cliffs was an Indian, obviously a Yaqui. The Yaqui was lithe, but powerfully built, his coppery body perfectly proportioned. He wore drill pants and a white shirt, with a scarlet sash tied about his slim waist. His hair, black as a raven's wing, fell almost to his shoulders and was held in place by a red bandeau that girded his head.

The Indian wore no gun, but sheathed in his sash was a keen-bladed, wicked-looking knife.

The Yaqui straightened as Morgan rode into the clearing.

"What did the smoke mean, Senor?" he asked. "Senor" was the only name by which he ever addressed this trailmate of his.

"Trouble, Blue Hawk," Morgan said bluntly. "It was a line cabin on fire, and when I got there it had already burned to the ground. There was nothin' I could do about it. I'll tell yuh about it soon as I take care of the roan."

Morgan rode on toward the grass patch, hearing Blue Hawk call after him.

"Food and coffee is almost ready, Senor."

These two, Wayne Morgan and the Yaqui, Blue Hawk, were inseparable companions. Intensely loyal to each other, they had long ridden the danger trails of the West together.

Both men were well fitted for their self-imposed tasks. Morgan was swift and deadly with the twin .45s he wore, a tough adversary in any kind of fight. Blue Hawk was equally as tough for, in addition to possessing all the cunning and stealth of his Yaqui ancestors, he was deadly with the rifle he carried in a saddle scabbard and with the long-bladed knife in his sash.

OFTEN the courage and fighting prowess of the wandering cowboy, Wayne Morgan, had been compared to that of the famed Masked Rider, the black-garbed Nemesis of evil and injus-

tice whose blazing guns were ever ready to aid the oppressed. And well might it be, for the two were one and the same man, playing alternate rôles whenever circumstances demanded.

The legendary Robin Hood outlaw—the Masked Rider—known from Canada to the Rio Grande, from the Pacific to the Mississippi, was apt to appear, suddenly and unexpectedly, wherever the wicked threatened the righteous. In scores of spots his black guns had roared death and destruction to evil-doers, protecting the downtrodden, and as many conflicting stories were told of him. Some called him a renegade, a merciless, cold-blooded killer; others called him a black-garbed saint because, without desire for reward or thanks, he saved property and lives.

He was no merciless killer, but neither was he a saint—only a man with a deeply ingrained hatred for evil and injustice, with a desire to help those who were battling against hopeless odds.

No man, except Blue Hawk, knew that Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider were the same man, and wild horses could not have dragged the secret from the Yaqui. But not even Blue Hawk knew the Masked Rider's real name, nor why he had dedicated his life to righting wrong over all the West, for he never spoke of his past. He was a well-educated man, and had a store of knowledge on many subjects, but he was in no sense pedantic. And through choice he always spoke in the drawling idiom of the vast land he loved.

Over all the West there was no more deadly or courageous fighter than the mysterious man in black.

The Yaqui, Blue Hawk, also was well-educated, having taken seriously the teaching of the padres in the mission school he had attended. He spoke meticulous English, and his distinctions between good and evil were as strict as those of his kindred soul, the Masked Rider.

In this beautiful spot they had been resting and loafing for the last several days. It was their way to head in any direction their spirits led them, and always that was for a reason, they had found. Belatedly, they had seen the smoke rising from the burning line cabin. Morgan had decided to investigate, while Blue Hawk remained behind to prepare supper.

It was almost full dark by the time Morgan strode back into the firelight. Blue Hawk handed him a plate of food and a tin cup of steaming black coffee.

"As I said," Morgan began after he had taken a few bites of food, "the cabin had already burned down when I reached it. Nobody was in sight, and that told me somethin' was bad wrong. For there was a hoss in a corral, and on the ground was a hat and a half-empty whisky bottle. The owner wouldn't have walked away and left 'em. So I started pokin' about in the wreckage and ashes—and found about what I expected to."

"A body?" the Yaqui asked softly.

"A man's body, or what was left of it! Wasn't anything I could do for him, except rake what was left out of the embers. I was just startin' to do this, when I heard riders comin'. I didn't want to be found there, so I got back into the timber fast. I could see, and hear most of what was said."

Graphically, he recounted what had happened at the ruins of the cabin.

"This jigger Dan's story sounded pretty fishy to me," Morgan declared. "So when he made a break, and I saw he was about to make a getaway, I stopped him."

"This Ben Dura, Senor, who claims a great ranch was willed to him—you do not like him, no?" Blue Hawk said.

"I didn't like his looks, nor the way he acted," Morgan admitted, frowning. "The others—the sheriff, the old one they called Jericho Jenkins, the fat undertaker—all seemed on the level. Jenkins must have been there just a short while before I got there. I'd like to talk to him."

"You think the death of the Senor Cash Borders in the cabin was not an accident?" Blue Hawk asked shrewdly.

"That's the hunch I'm ridin'. A man sober enough to build a fire in a stove would have been sober enough to get out of a burnin' cabin. Two men stood to gain by his death—Ben Dura and Dan Borders, or Dan Tabor, whichever his name is. The only thing I'm shore of in my own mind is that Cash Borders was killed by somebody!"

"Then we do not ride out of Silvertip Basin tomorrow, as we had planned,"

the Yaqui said, his black eyes gleaming with excitement. "There is work here in this valley for the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk. . . . "

TWO nights later Wayne Morgan again rode into the little camp by the river, having just returned from the nearby cowtown of Monument. The big cowboy's dark eyes were thoughtful and slightly grim as he watered and turned the hammer-headed roan out to grass with the big black stallion Midnight, and the two other horses, one of which was the Indian's gray mount.

Blue Hawk, as usual, had food and coffee waiting. As Morgan ate, he told the Yaqui what he had found in town.

"I don't like the way things are shapin' up," he admitted grimly. "This Dan hombre is as shore to hang as the sun is to rise. If a mob don't make hangtree fruit out of him, the jury will convict him."

"Then they are convinced he is not Dan Borders, that he killed Cash Borders and schemed to steal his ranch?"

"From the judge on down! He don't have as much chance as a one-armed man in a hand-clappin' contest. They're givin' him a quick trial, with the verdict cut-and-dried. The prosecutin' attorney may be honest, but he's thick as glue with Ben Dura, and he's after this scar-faced jigger like a wolf."

"If this hombre is Dan Borders like he says," Blue Hawk murmured, "he should be able to get word from Texas where he lived for the last year."

"That's just what he done," Morgan grunted, "and it just drawed the noose a little tighter about his windpipe! Word came back that it couldn't be Dan Borders, because Dan Borders had tumbled into a canyon and died. If it's Borders, and he *did* fake his death like he claims, looks like he built a noose for his own neck!"

Morgan fell silent as he ate, staring frowningly into the fire. The Yaqui waited, watching his trailmate covertly. He knew that something was bothering Morgan.

The little river, no more than a creek, made a soft, whispery sound in the shadows. The wind had risen and raced on noisy feet through the trees overhead. Towering red walls were at their backs, while on two sides dense underbrush marched up to within a few yards.

"Dan," Morgan said slowly, "tells exactly the same story he told before. But somehow it don't sound near so fishy as it did before. Mebbe because I like Ben Dura less and less."

"You think, Senor, that perhaps the prisoner *is* Dan Borders?"

"That's what has got me bothered. I'd hate to think I was to blame for puttin' a rope about the neck of an innocent man. And, innocent or guilty, Dan's trial will end by tomorrow night. He'll hang."

"You talked with the Senor Sheriff?"

Morgan shook his head.

"He was too busy. But I had a couple of drinks with Stone Cady, the undertaker. He's a queer gander. Liable to haul out his harmonica anywhere and any time—plays it well, too. And the tall tales he tells!" Morgan grinned briefly. "There was the one about the trip he took through a country where everything had turned to stone. The grass and trees, with the petrified birds singin' petrified songs. He got hungry and tried to eat a petrified deer, but it was too tough, so he lived on petrified bird eggs—"

"Which is what you'll be, mister, if you two don't grab a bunch of stars!" a voice snapped out of the shadows. "Reach, quick!"

Amazement slapped at Wayne Morgan, and not altogether because somebody had accomplished the almost unbelievable feat of creeping up on Blue Hawk and himself. It was because that sharp, imperious voice belong to a girl!

CHAPTER V

A Girl, and a Gun

MORGAN darted a glance at Blue Hawk. The Yaqui, frozen motionless, was watching him, awaiting his signal for action. Slowly Blue Hawk relaxed then, knowing that if Morgan had been convinced their lives were in danger he would have exploded into violent action before this.

"Reach, blast you," the unseen girl's

voice lashed at them, "or I'll blow you both apart!"

They reached, Blue Hawk with a half-sheepish look at Morgan that was an apology for allowing this to happen.

They heard a rustling sound in the underbrush, and when Morgan looked around a girl stood in the firelight. She had a slender-barreled .38 in her hand. She was in denims, boots, and a fringed buckskin jacket that failed to hide the contours of her slender body.

She was, Morgan saw, amazingly pretty, with short-cut hair that gleamed like raw gold in the firelight. But the gun was steady, and her blue eyes blazed with a bitter, defiant anger.

Morgan grinned. "All right, lady," he said, "we're grabbin' as close to the stars as we can. What next!"

"Unbuckle your gun-belts and drop them to the ground," she ordered curtly.

"Uh-uh!" Morgan shook his head. "If this is a holdup, I might need them guns."

"This is not a holdup—but do as I say!"

"No can do. What's yore name, lady?"

"Sue Worth, if it makes any difference. For the last time, unbuckle those gun-belts!"

Morgan's eyes narrowed with interest. Sue Worth, hellcat stepdaughter of Clay Rand, Ben Dura had called her. Dan Tabor—or Borders—had been staying at the Rand ranch.

Still grinning lazily, Morgan drawled, "Sue, if yuh want these smokepoles yuh'll have to come and get 'em."

"I'll do just that!"

She started moving forward.

"But if you do," Morgan chuckled, "I'll grab yuh, turn yuh across my knee and wham the tar out of yuh!"

Indecision jumped into the girl's blue eyes. She stopped. "You wouldn't dare!" she said furiously. "I—I'd shoot you!"

"That'd be awful messy. Besides, then yuh'd have to bury me, and my trailmate too. Yuh couldn't just leave us layin' out here for the buzzards, could you?"

She swore at him suddenly, fiercely, tears of desperation in her eyes.

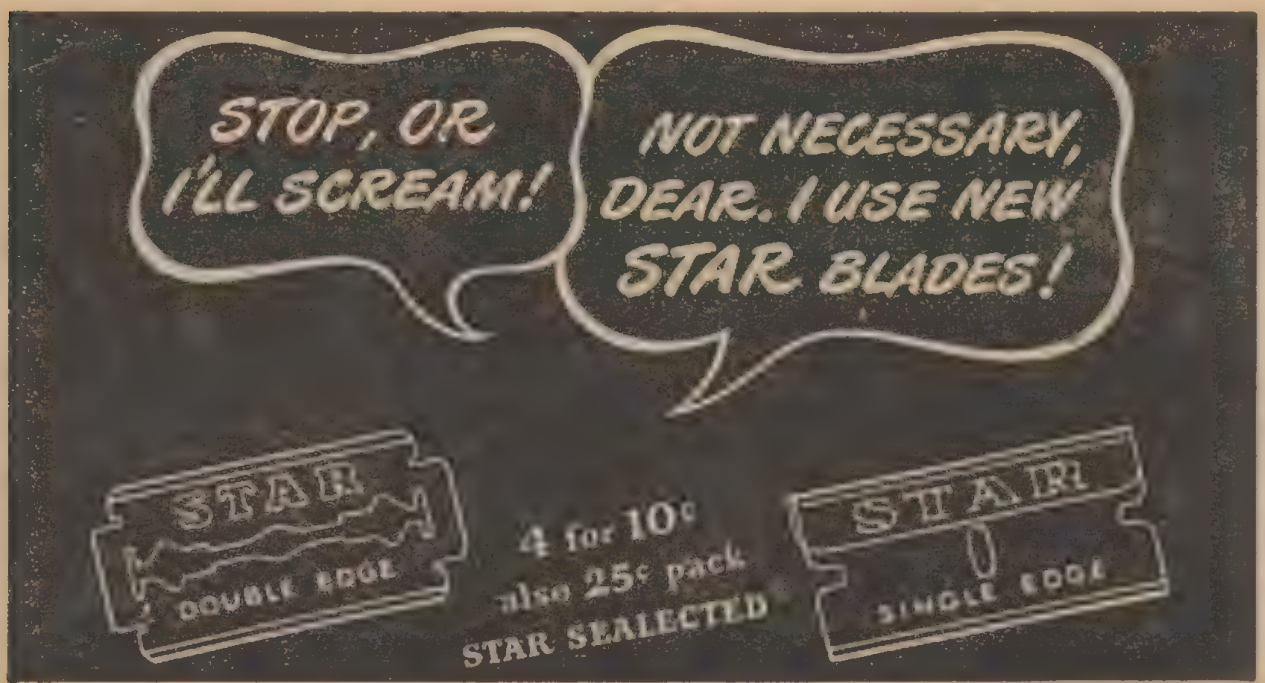
Morgan made clucking noises with his tongue. "Yuh sound more like a muleskinner than a lady. Reckon I'll have to give yuh that whammin', anyway. Here, give me that pea-shooter!"

"You—you stay away from me!" she blazed.

But the gun-muzzle sagged, and she suddenly sat down on the ground and started sobbing, still looking up at Morgan.

Morgan glanced soberly at Blue Hawk, and the impassive-faced Yaqui lowered his hands and turned to replenish the fire. Morgan sat down near the girl and waited for her sobbing to spend itself. Slowly her slender shoulders stopped shaking, and

[*Turn page*]



she holstered the gun and dabbed at her eyes with a 'kerchief.

"All right, Sue," Wayne Morgan said gently. "Tell me about it."

Most of the fight had gone from her, but anger still sparked in her eyes.

"You're Wayne Morgan, aren't you?"

"That's right. But is that any reason for tryin' to massacre me?"

"You turned Dan Borders over to the sheriff!" she accused bitterly. "You the same as killed him!"

The hair on the back of Morgan's neck prickled as the girl hurled the vehement accusation at him. He knew that there was nothing faked about her bitterness, nor about the grief in her blue eyes.

"I captured the gent that *calls* himself Dan Borders," he admitted. "Others think different."

"They're stupid fools!" she said angrily. "All but Ben Dura, and Dura just wants to hang him to get him out of the way. I talked to Dan at the jail. He told me you had captured him when he was about to get away."

MORGAN shook his head.

"Honest men don't try to run away," he told her.

"Dan knew he would probably be hanged before he could prove he was telling the truth if he was jailed—and that's what's about to happen. Anyway, I trailed you out here from town."

"What did yuh figger to do?"

"I—I don't know. I hated you for what you'd done to Dan, and still do. If he dies, it'll be your fault. Maybe I meant to shoot you, maybe I meant to try to make you do something about it. I don't know, and it doesn't matter. I've made a mess of it!"

"Yuh love this Dan, don't yuh?"

"Of course I love him! I'd do anything on earth to save him, *anything!* But what's the use? The judge and jury, everybody, have already made up their minds. They'll hang him!"

"Sue, what makes yuh so shore this busky is Dan Borders?"

"Why shouldn't I be sure?" she asked scornfully. "I knew Dan Borders before he went away, and I loved him then, even if I was just a kid of thirteen. I tagged along after him any time he'd let me. The first time I laid eyes on him, two weeks ago, I knew him even if he did have that awful scar. Even if I hadn't recognized him, the first words he said to me would have told me who he was."

"What was that?"

"Before he went away," Sue said slowly, "Dan had a nickname he called me—a nickname nobody else knew. It was 'Kitty Kat,' because he said I had a ratty temper. When he rode up two weeks ago I was in the yard, and he grinned at me and said, 'Hello, Kitty Kat!' That's why I'm absolutely *certain* he's Dan Borders."

"I believe yuh," Morgan said slowly. "I made a bad mistake. I'm sorry, Sue."

She smiled, and impulsively placed a tanned hand on his muscular arm.

"I guess that's the reason I couldn't shoot you. I knew you weren't an evil man, even though you had turned Dan over to the law. You just didn't understand. And I don't hate anybody else for it. They think they're doing right. They all do but Ben Dura and Al Caspin, that is."

"Al Caspin?"

"He's another Anvil rider, second in command under Dura. He's wicked, and a gunfighter, and I hate him. And I hate Dura! I hate my stepfather, Clay Rand, too. He—they're trying to—"

She had started to sob again, and Morgan saw terror mingled with the anxiety in her eyes.

"If yuh hate your stepfather, why don't yuh run away?" he asked.

"He'd only have me brought back!" she said passionately. "And he'd use a whip on me, like he did the other times I tried it. He's my legal guardian, you see, until I'm twenty. Besides, the ranch belonged to my mother when she married Clay Rand, and when I come of age it will belong to me." She stopped crying, and straightened her shoulders. "But my troubles don't matter. Nothing will matter after Dan Borders is dead!"

"He won't die," Morgan told her flatly. "You go on back home now, and stop worryin'!"

She looked at him quickly, hope shining in her eyes.

"You mean you will try to help him?"

"Not me," Morgan said. "But I know somebody who won't be so finicky about what the law thinks."

"But who could help Dan now?"

"The Masked Rider. He's a friend of

mine, and I happen to know he's in Silvertip Basin. I figger If I give him the set-up he'll be willin' to do what he can."

"Oh, I hope he can do something!" Sue Worth's eyes were aglow, her red lips smiling again. "I've heard of the Masked Rider, and that he's always ready to fight for what is right and good. "But"—her eyes clouded slightly—"I've also heard he is a bandit and killer."

"Folks have to make up their own minds about that," Morgan told her. "The Masked Rider don't ask anybody to believe he's either good or bad. All I can promise is that I'll see him tonight!"

CHAPTER VI

Court Room Rescue

THE murder trial of the tawny-haired young rider who called himself Dan Borders was over and his fate rested in the hands of the six-man jury. Thirty minutes before, that jury had retired to a small anteroom behind the judge's rostrum to decide on their verdict.

A tense air of expectancy hovered over the packed courtroom. Sweating men in range garb jammed the rows of rough wooden benches. A low hum of excited conversation rose and fell.

Every eye in the room was riveted, more or less constantly, on the closed door of the anteroom behind Judge Clagg's rostrum. For, although the waiting men all were fairly certain what the verdict would be, their grim, weathered faces plainly showed the strain they had been under the last three days.

Nobody had expected the jury to take more than twenty minutes to return its "guilty" verdict. For the prosecuting attorney, Warford, had been merciless and cunning in his attempts to prove that the defendant was an interloper, a scheming, clever criminal who had murdered Cash Borders and attempted to pass himself off as the dead man's son in an attempt to gain possession of a vast rangeland empire.

Judge Clagg, a raw-boned, stern-visaged man with a white mustache, sat quietly waiting, gazing with frosty eyes out over the crowded room. Directly before and below him, seated at a table with Sheriff Lute Jacks, was the prisoner. The man who called himself Borders did not appear particularly perturbed. His eyes and his scarred brown face showed only a cold, sneering contempt as his gaze roamed over the faces in the room. He knew that a large majority had already adjudged him guilty.

Only when his gaze touched a white, anxious face near the back of the room did his gaze soften. That face was Sue Worth's. She was sitting proudly and defiantly alone on one of the hard benches, the only woman in the room.

Almost behind Sue, huddled against the rear wall and nearly hidden from view by the white men who crowded in front of him, was another man who seemed oddly out of place. He was an Indian, with a red bandeau about his head holding in place a single eagle feather. Despite the heat, a many-hued blanket covered the redman's lithe body from shoulders to knees, and he nodded and drowsed as if he had no interest whatever in what went on. But Blue Hawk's obsidian eyes missed nothing.

On one of the front benches, behind and slightly to one side of the sheriff and Dan Borders, sat Ben Dura. On the Anvil man's face was a look of triumph.

On the bench beside Dura sat a red-haired, waspish man whose greenish eyes held a cynical cruelty. This man was Al Caspin, Dura's lieutenant, a fancy-dressing man who wore dark velvet trousers and a beaded fawnskin jacket, and was snake-fast with his silver-handled gun.

The minutes ran on, each one interminable. The tension increased rather than lessened, as the spectators shifted impatiently and craned their necks to look at the closed door of the anteroom. Judge Clagg still sat quietly. Sue Worth sat with slender body stiffly erect, a torment of hope and doubt in her eyes.

Could she depend on what the cowboy, Wayne Morgan, had told her? Time was running out, and there had been no sign of the Masked Rider.

The courtroom took in the entire bottom floor of the frame building. On the upper floor were the jail and sheriff's office. One side of the courtroom was "blind," being jammed up against another

structure. Windows on the other side, however, opened into an alley that extended the entire length of the building. Windows in the jury room also opened into this alley.

At the rear of the room was a single doorway, which opened onto a narrow, rubbish-littered back street that was used mainly as a hitching place for horses and wagon teams.

A drunken puncher jostled against Blue Hawk. He looked at the blanket-swathed figure, and snarled.

"What yuh mean bumpin' into me, yuh dirty redskin?"

Blue Hawk moved aside, lowering his eyes to hide the anger in them.

"Sorry, senor!" he murmured.

ON THE front bench, Dura whispered something to Al Caspin, and the waspy gunman laughed.

On the bench directly behind Dura and Caspin sat paunchy, bearded old Doc Wind, and beside him Stone Cady.

"I'm not so sure about this," the little medico muttered to the fat undertaker. "I brought Dan Borders into this world."

"When a man comes to the end of his trail," Cady murmured back, "he looks back and sees a lot of lights in the dark. Those lights are the good things he has done."

"What's the hold up?" a puncher yelled, his voice thick. "Call out the jury, and let's hang the lyin' skunk!"

Judge Clagg's gavel pounded.

"Another outbreak," he said sternly, "and I'll have the room cleared!"

At the back of the room, the blanket-shrouded figure of Blue Hawk stirred suddenly and straightened. His black eyes became alert.

Somebody in the crowd said hoarsely:

"The door's openin'—they're comin' out!"

The gaze of every man in the courtroom flashed to the door of the anteroom where the jury had been closeted. The doorknob had turned, the door was swinging slowly open. It swung fully open, as if pushed by a gust of wind, and for a moment the doorway gaped empty.

Then a single figure appeared in the opening as if by magic. Not one of the jurymen, but a tall, grim, black-clad figure. A black cape flowed from stalwart shoulders, cold eyes shone through the slits of a black domino mask, a black sombrero was drawn low over the eyes. In the hands of the somber-clad figure were a pair of murderous-looking six-shooters.

The sudden, unexpected appearance of that startling figure shocked the courtroom into stark silence and immobility.

With a sudden gasp of thanksgiving, Sue Worth leaped to her feet, pushed her way to the aisle, darted for the back doorway.

"The Masked Rider!" a voice cried hoarsely.

Blue Hawk's apparent drowsiness left him abruptly. He flung aside the blanket, exposing a short-barreled carbine in his hands. He shoved several men aside and, with the agility of a cougar, leaped upon a table jammed against the wall.

The Masked Rider's clarion voice rang out sternly.

"Stay still, everybody, and keep yore hands away from gun. Blue Hawk!"

"Yes, Senor—I am ready!"

Eyes pivoted to the back of the room, riveting on the lithe figure of the Yaqui as he stood there on the table, rifle muzzle weaving like a snake's head, commanding a view of the entire room.

"Kill the first man who reaches for a gun, Hawk!" the masked man ordered coldly. "Gentlemen, I don't want to hurt anybody. All I want is Dan Borders. He's a *amigo* of mine!"

Amazed talk broke over the room. Through the doorway behind the Masked Rider they could see two or three of the jurymen lying on the floor, bound with strips of ropes. It was easy to surmise that the man in black had come along the alley, through a window into the anteroom, taking the jurymen entirely by surprise.

"Borders, get over here beside me!" the Masked Rider snapped.

"Masked Rider, I don't *sabe* what this is all about," the prisoner said, and grinned crookedly, as he got to his feet, "but I'm with yuh all the way!"

Some of the paralysis of shocked surprise was wearing off now. Raw-boned old Judge Clagg turned slowly, a frown drawing his shaggy brows down, his craggy face without fear. Sheriff Jacks was blinking owlishly, slowly marshaling his facilities.

At the back of the room, Blue Hawk's

voice was like a whiplash. "Senor, let the gun alone!"

A grizzled rancher, near the center of the room, jumped as if a hornet had stung him. Carefully he withdrew his hand from the gun toward which it had been inching.

Ben Dura and Al Caspin sat still, aware of the Masked Rider's cold eyes upon them.

"If yuh see an openin', throw down on that masked devil!" Dura whispered from the corner of his mouth.

With a taunting grin, Dan Borders stepped past Judge Clagg and paused beside the man in black.

"Through that window!" the Masked Rider snapped. "There are hosses at the back end of the alley."

"How come you buyin' chips in this game, Masked Rider?" the scar-faced man asked curiously.

"No time for talk now—red Hades is liable to bust loose any second. Take my orders, or stay here!"

"Bueno!"

DAN took four steps and stepped through an open window into the alley.

"Sheriff, yuh aim to let two men hold up a whole courtroom full of people?" Dura yelled furiouly. "The Masked Rider is a wanted outlaw, and so is the Injun, with plenty *dinero* on their scalps!"

"By godfrey, Masked Rider, yuh can't do this!" Sheriff Jacks roared, as if he had just awakened. He heaved to his feet. "Yuh're under arrest!"

One of the masked man's black guns roared, the bullet slashing into the floor between the sheriff's feet. With a croak of alarm, the lawman pulled up abruptly, the hand that had been moving toward his holstered gun hanging in midair.

"The next one will be higher, Sheriff," the Robin Hood rider said quietly.

"But—but this ain't accordin' to law!" the sheriff spluttered, swallowing hard. "Dan Tabor is a killer, wanted for the killin' of Cash Borders!"

"His name's Dan Borders, and Cash Borders was his father, just like he claims!" the Masked Rider declared. "I think the killer of Cash Borders is still right here in this room!"

"Likely he done it himself, if Dan Tabor didn't!" Dura snarled. "He's a cold-blooded killer, I tell yuh!"

"Dura"—the black-clad man's voice rasped like a file against steel—"open yore yap ag'in and I'll fill it full of lead!"

Under the stark threat of that cold voice, Dura sat down abruptly.

The Masked Rider started moving toward the window through which the scar-faced man had vanished. But, as he started past the judge's rostrum, the raw-boned old judge suddenly and recklessly flung himself at the masked man.

The Masked Rider hated to take life at any time, even that of an outlaw. He had gambled greatly on being able to effect the rescue of Dan Borders without having to injure or kill anybody. Even now, as he saw the fiery-eyed old judge hurtling toward him, he decided to play the hand as he had started it.

With incredible quickness he holstered one of the black guns, leaped aside, swung his fist. The blow caught Judge Clagg on the point of the jaw, hurled him to the floor, stunned but not seriously injured.

With the same swift, coordinated movement the Masked Rider whirled, leaped for a window. He heard an angry roar go up from the room behind him. From the corner of his eye, as he went head-first through the window, he saw a gun leap into Al Caspin's hand, saw flame and smoke leap from its muzzle.

And he saw old Doc Wind, clawing up over the bench behind Caspin, lunge into the waspish gunman, sending the bullet into the ceiling. It looked amazingly like the move on the little medico's part had been deliberate!

The Masked Rider landed in the alley on hands and knees. He rolled, came up running, headed for the back end of the alley where get-away horses for Blue Hawk, Borders and himself were at a tie-bar. He ran at a full crouch, his boot heels digging into the dirt, so as to be below the level of the remaining windows that opened into the alley.

Suddenly he collided violently with a man. He writhed away, his gun chopping downward in a quick, savage blow.

"Hold it, Masked Rider," a voice snapped. "I just wanted to be shore yuh got out of that hornets' nest!"

Almost too late, the masked man checked the downward swing of the clubbed gun, realizing that it was Dan Borders who

had been crouched there against the wall.

"Get on—get on!" he said sharply, and in that crouched position they raced the length of the alley and emerged into the rubbish-littered back street.

Blue Hawk came through the rear doorway of the courtroom with a backward, catlike leap, still menacing those inside with his rifle. Then the Yaqui whirled and darted to a nearby hitch-bar where the Masked Rider's big black stallion Midnight stood ground-hitched beside Blue Hawk's wiry gray.

The Yaqui jerked loose the reins of a rangy, powerful steel-dust gelding at an adjoining bar and shoved them at Borders.

"That's Al Caspin's bronc!" Borders said.

"Hit leather!" the Masked Rider clipped, whirling to slam a couple of shots back over the courthouse. "Stealin' a hoss won't hurt yuh any with the law now. It can be returned later!"

THE scar-faced young man jumped for the steeldust. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk leaped into saddles. The great stallion, sleek ears flattened, eyes aglow with a greenish fire, reared and danced a weird jig on his hind feet as he whirled. The blasting guns, and now the sudden appearance of his beloved rider, told him that excitement and danger were afoot.

They wheeled away from the tie-rack.

Men were pouring from the back doorway of the courtroom.

"There they go!" a voice bellowed. "There's a sackful of scalp money on the Masked Rider and the Injun—cut 'em down!"

A gun bucketed out its wild racket, and the vengeful sound was taken up by others.

But by now the three fleeing men were fifty yards away, weaving and darting on an erratic course through the horses and wagons. Blue Hawk and Borders swerved suddenly, following the Robin Hood rider's lead, and they shot into an alley. They thundered the length of the narrow alley and emerged into the front street.

Men were streaming into the street from the front doors of the courthouse, and as they saw the three racing riders, infuriated cries arose. A few guns sent out their dim, futile sounds. Then the three were at the head of the street, swerving into the trail that wound westward and northward toward the Anvil and the farther hills.

CHAPTER VII

The Gun Prodigal

LEADING the way, his powerful muscles rippling, Midnight was running with an effortless ease. Few horses in all the West could equal the mighty stallion in speed or endurance. Blue Hawk's wiry gray was almost as fast. And in the steeldust Borders rode, they quickly discovered, they had chosen a magnificent animal.

Mounted on these three horses, the escaping men knew that they need have little fear of pursuit.

A mile from town, a lone rider suddenly appeared on the trail ahead, then wheeled and raced along with them. High color and excitement glowed on Sue Worth's face.

"Sue!" Dan cried. "What're you doin' here?"

"I was in the courtroom when the Masked Rider appeared," Sue explained, casting an admiring glance at the black-garbed outlaw. "I guessed what was going to happen, so I left, and came out here to wait. I thought I might help."

"But they might corner us and take you, too!"

"Not when you and I know the foothills like we do!" she flashed, and turned to the masked man. "Masked Rider, Wayne Morgan said you would do something, but I'd almost given up hope. I—I don't know how to thank you!"

"Don't try," the mystery rider advised bluntly. "Besides, there's still a lot to be done. This saves Dan Borders from a hangrope, but he's still charged with killin', and if he's captured again he'll likely be strung up quick. If yuh know a good hideout country, head toward it."

"Tomahawk Canyon!" Dan called, above the clatter of hoofs. "Remember the cave we found and explored there when were just kids, Kitty Kat?"

Sue nodded, flashed a look at the Masked Rider.

"You see? That's something else no-

body but the real Dan Borders would know!"

"You don't have to tell me," the masked man declared, although he was inwardly elated at this convincing proof that he was now on the right trail. "Wayne Morgan's already done that."

They left the trail and struck off at a tangent toward the shadowy foothills. By now the sun was low above the timbered crests, tipping them with shimmering fire. In less than thirty minutes the sun would be down, eliminating all danger from pursuit.

When they came to Williwaw Creek, a mile above the camp Morgan and Blue Hawk had made, the Masked Rider called a halt to let the horses drink and blow. It was only then that Borders and the girl noticed that the Yaqui was no longer with them, having vanished with the stealth and cunning of his savage ancestors.

"No hurry now," the masked man commented, glancing at the setting sun. "A posse would be slow in gettin' started, and they'd have to travel a lot slower than we have."

"Masked Rider," Dan Borders said earnestly, "since yuh risked yore life to snake me out of a noose, I reckon yuh must know what this is all about. I'd like for yuh to believe that I really am Cash Borders' son."

"If I hadn't been convinced of that," the masked man said frankly, "I'd have let the jury convict yuh and the law hang yuh. So we can skip that part of it."

"Even that," Dan declared, "don't clear me of the killin' charge. I admit I was pretty wild before I left Silvertip, Masked Rider. I got into a lot of ruckuses and ran with a tough bunch. Finally, in a gamblin' brawl in a dive at Hellgate, a tough settlement up in the hills, I shot a man named Sid Parrot. I thought I'd killed him, and made a run for it. It was a long time before I found out Parrot hadn't died, and then it was pretty late. I kept on driftin'."

"What about Ben Dura?" the Masked Rider asked abruptly. "How long has he been Anvil foreman?"

"About ten years, I think. He'd been there quite a while before I left. I never did quite savvy that part of it, and still don't. But I gathered that Dad owed Ben Dura some kind of debt—Dura had saved Dad's life some time earlier, I think—and when Dad owed a debt he always paid it. So he paid it by makin' Dura Anvil foreman, even though I happen to know he never did like Dura and didn't get along with him. And now Dura has paid him back for his generosity, like any snake does!"

"You think Dura is crooked?"

"Ben Dura," Dan said, glancing at the girl, "is a low-down buzzard! And so is Al Caspin!"

"Why do yuh say that?"

DAN BORDERS answered gruffly, angrily.

"Several reasons. First, I think he's tryin' to steal the Anvil. Oh, I don't doubt he's got a will, all right, leavin' everything to him and supposedly signed by Cash Borders. But it's a fake!"

"What makes yuh so shore of that? The way I heard it, Cash Borders didn't have any known close relatives, except you. And remember, he thought you were dead. Since yuh admit he owed Ben Dura a debt, why wouldn't he leave his property to him?"

"Seen that way, it sounds reasonable. But Dad knew I was alive! I wrote him from Texas several months ago, tellin' him what I had done, and that I was alive and well. He answered my letter, beggin' me to come home. That's why I'm plumb certain Dad didn't will the Anvil to Ben Dura!"

"Which is a bull of a different color," the Masked Rider murmured. "Yuh got that letter from yore father with yuh?"

"It's in my warbag, at Sue's place," Dan Borders said. "But in it Dad said everything would be mine when he died, and he had a hunch he would soon be crossin' the last river."

"Evidently, if what yuh suspect is true, Cash Borders hadn't told Dura yuh were alive."

"That's plain enough. If I'd gone straight to Dad when I first got here, likely he'd be alive now. But I saw somethin' was wrong, even then. For one thing, only a few of the old riders was still at the Anvil. In their place was a crew of gun-toughs, and I was pretty shore Dura had hired them. I was all set to bust things wide open with Dura—and now here I am saddled with the charge of killin' my own father and tryin' to steal my own ranch!"

The Masked Rider stood up. "The best thing yuh can do is stay out of sight for a while," he said.

"While a bunch of skunks steal the ranch my father spent a lifetime buildin' up?" Dan Borders blurted. "And while Sue is in danger?"

"What kind of danger?"

"Don't worry about me, Dan," Sue said quickly. "I'll be all right."

"From Dura and Caspin," Borders said sullenly. "And that slimy stepfather of hers, Clay Rand! Dura claims he's in love with Sue. But she won't look at him, and now he's tryin' to buy her from Rand like he would a cussed hoss." Borders swore furiously. "I'll kill the son! I should have already!"

"Let it ride," the man in black advised gently. "I'll see that she's protected. The main thing right now is to prove yuh didn't kill Cash Borders, and to find out the truth about that will. Yuh mentioned a place where you can hole-up."

Borders nodded. "A big cave, just inside Tomahawk Canyon, four-five miles up this creek. Sue and me ran across it one day a long time ago, and so far as I know nobody else knows it's there. A place to hide the hoss, too, where nobody'll be likely to find it."

He told the Masked Rider in detail just how to reach the spot and find the cave entrance.

"Only thing, I've got no grub."

"I'll bring you food," Sue promised quickly. "Tonight, if I can. If not, then tomorrow. I'll keep you supplied."

"*Bueno!*" The masked man smiled at them briefly, a slightly wistful smile, as they stood there close together in the gathering dusk. "You youngsters play 'em close, and stop worryin'. I'm ridin' a hunch that this is goin' to pan out plenty high-grade!"

He lifted his hand, swung into saddle, and man and horse vanished ghostlike into the shadows. . . .

ALTHOUGH it was mid-morning, gray mist still curled up from Williwaw Creek. It coiled and writhed like tentacles about the charred black wreckage of the Anvil line shack where Cash Borders had died.

Wayne Morgan dismounted and gazed soberly about the small clearing. The body had, of course, been removed for burial. The horse was no longer in the pole corral, the saddle, bridle and hat, grisly reminders of a tragedy, had been taken away. Cold ashes and charred timbers were all that remained.

Morgan found a long pole and poked gingerly about in the debris, but found nothing of interest. He shrugged disappointedly. If only those charred ruins could talk, if they could tell what, if anything, had been in Cash Borders' mind as the creaming flames had grown hotter and hotter!

For Wayne Morgan was convinced that here was the focal point of a sinister mystery. He was convinced that the whisky-drinking rancher had been killed, and that a bold attempt was being made to steal the vast rangeland empire he had built up.

It still was possible that he had made a mistake in the scar-faced gent who called himself Dan Borders. If so, it was a serious one. But the cards had been dealt and he had to play them as they lay.

And the girl, Sue Worth—had she played him for a sucker? If so, she was in with the scar-faced Dan on the scheme. Those were things on which he had to take a chance.

Leaving the clearing, Morgan angled toward the foothills which he could see dimly through the clammy mist. He wanted to have a talk with the old wild horse hunter, Jericho Jenkins.

On one of his pasears into Monument he had learned the approximate location of Jericho's camp. He wasn't certain what he hoped to find out from the oldster, but he never failed to ride a hunch.

As he left the Williwaw behind, the mist thinned and finally disappeared altogether, letting through the golden sunlight. The ground lifted gradually under the roan's hoofs, the meadows became fewer, and he found himself riding across timbered ridges that cradled grassy swales between them.

He struck a dim but well-defined trail and followed it, guessing that it would lead him to Jericho's camp, an abandoned line shack on the extreme western edge of Anvil land. Presently he heard the neigh of a horse, directly ahead. And then he heard voices.

He pulled up instantly. Jericho Jenkins

lived alone.

The voices were sharp, angry. He recognized old Jericho's shrill voice. He pulled off the trail into a dense thicket, where he dismounted, ground-hitched the roan, and went silently forward toward the spot from which the voices came.

He crouched at the edge of another small clearing, close-hemmed by encroaching thickets and weeds. In the clearing was a rickety cabin and a large, peeled-pole corral that held a big, mean-eyed palomino stallion. A couple of wolf skins were nailed to the cabin logs.

The buckskin-clad little oldster stood backed against the cabin wall, facing four riders who sat their horses less than ten yards away. Jericho's bald skull gleamed in the sunshine; his enormous mustache bristled with rage, and his bony jaws worked rhythmically on his tobacco cud.

In the forefront of the riders was Al Caspin, mounted on a big, silver-bedecked dun. Caspin's own gaudy raiment gleamed in the sun. He was grinning, his thin features cruel and feline, his yellowish eyes as wicked as a snake's.

The three other riders were gun-belted, tough-looking.

"It's yore last chance, old man," the Masked Rider heard Caspin say flatly. "When I come by here next time yuh better be long gone!"

"To blazes with yuh!" Jericho shrilled. "Cash Borders hired me, and can't no two-bit gunslick kick me off this proppity!"

"We'll see about that," Caspin purred.

CHAPTER VIII

Clash in the Hills

DRAWING back into the thicket, Wayne Morgan circled, slipping through the thorny underbrush with the speed and stealth of an Indian to come up behind the cabin. The undergrowth crept right up to the walls.

At the back of the cabin a door stood partly ajair. Morgan slid through into the shack, crossed the one crudely furnished room and stood near the front door. The voices came to him sharper and clearer now.

Al Caspin's voice was soft, but deadly and goading.

"So yuh won't pull out of here, huh?"

"No, by gravy, not till I'm cussed good and ready!" Jericho said stubbornly. "Cash Borders ain't told me to leave."

"And he never will. That old badger's dead, and the Anvil belongs to somebody else now."

"He's dead, all right," Jericho agreed bitterly. "Killed by some slime-crawlin' sidewinder!"

Caspin's eyes narrowed wickedly.

"What yuh mean by that, old man?"

"Never mind." Old Jericho's voice sounded uneasy, as though he realized he had said too much. "I didn't mean nothin'."

"Yuh meant somethin'! Spit it out, cuss yuh!"

"None of yore danged business what I meant. Get out of here!"

"In a hurry, ain't yuh?" Caspin jibed. "I want to know what yuh meant by Cash Borders bein' killed."

"Plumb interested, ain't yuh?"

"Interested, yeah. And I'm waitin'!"

"Go to blazes!" Jericho blared.

He wheeled and started into the cabin.

Caspin's voice struck at him sharply.

"Pull up, old man!"

Jericho stopped and turned slowly. Caspin sat with his hands on the saddle-horn, still grinning, but with that vindictive cruelty etched even more plainly on his knifelike features.

"Jericho," Caspin purred, "I've changed my mind. Yuh don't have to pull out of here."

"All right, Al," Jericho said carefully.

"Yuh're stayin' here—a long time. Yuh're packin' a gun, old man. Use it!"

Old Jericho Jenkins' bony face set in dogged lines. He knew that the instant he started his draw against Al Caspin he was a dead man. But he fell into a half-crouch, his thin old shoulders rolling forward.

"All right, yuh killin' swine!" he shrilled bitterly. "But killin' me won't help yuh none!"

"Draw!" Caspin spat.

"*You* draw, Caspin!" a cold voice spat. "If yuh're ready to bed down with the devil!"

Wayne Morgan leaped through the doorway, a long-barreled six in each hand.

Surprise struck sharply across the faces of Caspin and his three men. Caspin quit

grinning, his ferretlike face cold and cunning. For ten seconds nobody moved.

"Morgan!" Jericho yelled. "Waugh! Mebbe I ain't glad to see you! These wallopers was all set to salt me!"

"I noticed that," Morgan said curtly, his hard gaze playing over Al Caspin. "Four big, bad, curly-tailed wolves against one old man. Ain't that pretty stiff odds, Al?"

Caspin had regained his composure. He was grinning again.

"These other boys didn't count," he said. "I don't need no help, not with any man. Drifter, yuh're stickin' yore nose where it's liable to get mashed off!"

"Like yuh smashed the Masked Rider's when he buffaloed a whole courtroom?" Morgan sneered. "Caspin, I don't like you. I don't like yore looks, the way yuh talk, nor yore smell. Get out of here!"

Caspin sat motionless for seconds, regarding Morgan with sly, calculating eyes.

"A cold drop makes a difference, don't it?" he sneered.

"Jericho," Morgan said, not taking his gaze from Caspin, "put yore gun on those three gunnies behind Caspin. If anybody moves, make cold slab meat out of 'em!"

"I'll do her, by Hannah!" Jericho grinned. He drew a long-barreled old Peacemaker and stepped over where he commanded a clear view of Caspin's three silent followers. "You aimin' to have yuh some fun, younker?"

"I aim to see just how much a cold drop means to Al Caspin!" Morgan said coldly.

WITH a quick movement he holstered the twin guns. Caspin moved in the saddle, watching this with a narrow, wary interest. He studied Morgan with a new, professional thoroughness—Morgan's lean, pantherlike body, his confidence, his tied-down guns.

"All right, Caspin," Morgan drawled. "We'll start even."

Caspin wet his lips. "With that old wolf already holdin' a smokepole on me? Yuh call that even?"

"Jericho," Morgan said, "if Caspin downs me, get back inside the cabin and let 'em go."

Jericho's mustache bobbed as he swallowed.

"If you say so, Morgan," he muttered.

"All right, Caspin," Morgan said flatly. "Draw!"

But Caspin sat motionless, a sudden caution making his eyes smoky. Sweat trickled from his forehead and over his cheeks.

"It's not what I call an even shake," he said doggedly. "Some other time and place, drifter."

"Here and now!" Morgan spat. "Draw, or crawl out of here like the yellow hound yuh are!"

Whiteness crept more and more over Caspin's thin face, and into his eyes came the gray and dismal knowledge of defeat.

"Yuh're top dog now, drifter," he flung bitterly at Morgan, "but top dogs don't live long!"

It was a cold back-down.

"Yore business is finished here," Morgan said contemptuously. "Start ridin'!"

Caspin wheeled his horse and, followed by the three Anvil riders, spurred savagely away. They vanished quickly into the hemming timber.

"Green River!" Jericho whooped. "I wouldn't a-took a yard of my wuthless hide for that!"

"It takes nerve to draw on a man unless yuh're shore yuh can beat him," Morgan said slowly. "Caspin wasn't shore. . . . What was it all about?"

"Caspin told me to pull out of here, that's all I know. I told him to go to tunket."

"Why did he want yuh to leave?"

"Didn't say. Dura's orders, I reckon. Since Cash Borders is gone, they don't want me about. Reckon they figger they can handle them wild mustangs theirselves."

"And mebbe," Morgan said shrewdly, "they figger yuh might know too much?"

Jericho shot a glance at Morgan from under shaggy brows.

"Meanin' what?"

"Meanin' the way Cash Borders died. Jericho, you figger Borders was killed, don't yuh?"

"Mebbe. Leastwise, that's what the young hellion callin' hisself Dan Tabor, and which the Masked Rider snaked out of the Monument courtroom was accused of."

"I know the Masked Rider, and I know he's usually pretty shore what he's doin'. I figger that young jigger *is* Dan Borders, like he claims. If he is, it wouldn't make sense for him to kill his own father, would it, when he would get the Anvil anyway?"

"Correct," Jericho agreed. "Yuh just saved my bacon, Morgan. What is it yuh want to know?"

"Whether, when yuh reached the burnin' line cabin, yuh saw anything that made yuh think Cash Borders had been killed."

Jericho wrenched off a fresh chew.

"It was hot as the hinges of perdition and I couldn't get very close," he said. "But I got close enough to see that the door was barred from the outside and had been nailed to!"

"That was the only door?"

"Yeah! Planks had been nailed over the one window, too. 'Course, at the time I wasn't shore Cash was inside. Cussed if I know what kept me from mentionin' it."

"And now Dura and Caspin want yuh out of the way—out of the country, or dead. That mean anything to yuh, Jericho?"

Jericho's Adam's apple bobbed convulsively.

"Plenty! And mebbe I've had my suspicions all along. But where's yore proof, Morgan?"

Morgan had to admit that there wasn't any.

"Keep those eagle eyes peeled, Jericho," he cautioned, and turned to watch the big palomino stallion which was prancing with head high about the pole corral. "A nice animal yuh got there."

"Caught him at a water-hole way up in the Ramparts," Jericho said proudly. "He's pizen mean as a Gila monster, but it won't be long till I'll have him eatin' out of my hand."

The young waddy nodded.

BLUE HAWK

MORGAN returned to his roan he always rode in his rôle of wandering waddy, mounted, and angled down through the hills. It was now well past noon, and he ate a cold meal, then remounted and continued on until he came to the Williwaw. He rode along the stream until he reached a spot where the water surged with a roar between black, dripping walls.

This, he knew, was the mouth of Tomahawk Canyon. Extending along the base of one of the walls was a narrow, slippery rock ledge barely wide enough to permit the passage of a horse. Beyond this mist-filled bottleneck, the canyon apparently spread out to a considerable width.

Morgan had an impulse to see if he could

find Dan Borders' hideout cave, but remembered that only the Masked Rider was supposed to know of its existence. He retraced his course, and half an hour later gave the cry of the mountain lion as he approached the camp beside the creek. The cry was not answered, and he surmised that Blue Hawk was still keeping an eye on Clay Rand's run-down ranch for Sue Worth's protection. This had been Morgan's suggestion when he had left camp that morning.

It was after sundown when Blue Hawk came silently into camp. Morgan had food and coffee prepared. As they ate, Morgan brought his Yaqui trailmate up to date on the day's happenings.

"So it looks like my hunch that Cash Borders was killed is right. What we don't know is *who* nailed Cash Borders inside the cabin before settin' it afire, and why."

"As Senor suggested, I watched Clay Rand's place most of the day," Blue Hawk said quietly. "Rand and the girl were alone at the ranch all morning. Soon after noon Rand rode away toward town. Then the senorita left, riding toward the hills. Rand returned an hour before sundown. But when I started for camp, half an hour ago, the Senorita Sue had not returned."

"Sue probably carried some grub to Dan Borders," Morgan murmured. "She'll have to be careful."

The Yaqui nodded. "As I started to leave," he said, "I saw a rider headed in toward Rand's rancho. It was the Senor Ben Dura. I thought possibly that might be of interest to the Masked Rider."

Morgan quickly put aside his coffee cup and got to his feet.

"Yuh're right, Hawk," he said crisply. "It might be interestin' to find out what business Dura has with Clay Rand. Saddle Midnight, will yuh?"

Blue Hawk leaped to obey. He vanished like a wraith from the fire glow, returning shortly with the great stallion Midnight, bridled and saddled. By now it was full dark.

Morgan had taken from his bedroll the flowing black cape, the black domino mask and black sombrero, and donned them. The wandering cowboy, Wayne Morgan, had become the mysterious, black-garbed rider of the danger trails, the Masked Rider.

Midnight reared, dancing his weird jig there in the firelight, as he always did upon being mounted by that daredevil in black, knowing that it almost invariably presaged danger and excitement.

"Wait here, Hawk," he instructed the Yaqui. "I don't expect to be gone long."

Midnight stopped his macabre jigging, and man and horse vanished like a black shadow along the creek.

They gained a long meadow. Midnight, after hours of inactivity, was eager to travel, and the Masked Rider let him run. Within a half hour they approached the spot where Clay Rand's run-down ranch buildings huddled in the lee of towering sandstone walls.

CHAPTER IX

Skunk Bargain

QUIETLY the Masked Rider dismounted in the deep shadows of a huge pin-oak behind a rail corral. Before him in the shadows loomed the low bulk of the ranchhouse and the smaller shapes of the out buildings. They were quiet, and at first seemed utterly dark.

Then the Masked Rider detected a faint gleam of light at the bottom of a shaded window. Leaving the black ground-hitched, he went swiftly, silently, forward. He heard a horse stamp nearby, and saw the shape of the saddled animal at a tie-bar in front of the low ranchhouse.

He gained the wall, circled it, and crouched under the curtained window behind which a light glowed.

"Cuss yuh, Ben!" he heard a cursing, petulant voice say. "I'll sell her to yuh, all right, but yuh got to pay my price!"

At the bottom of the curtain was a narrow sliver of yellow light. The window was raised and the curtain swayed gently with the cool wind that blew.

With a sharpening anger plucking at his nerves, the Masked Rider knelt and placed his eyes to the opening.

He looked into what obviously was a kitchen. A guttering oil lamp stood on a table that was littered with dirty dishes. Beside the lamp was a stone jug.

Facing each other across the table were two men. One of them was a lanky, pale-

eyed man with thin, sly features whom the Masked Rider knew from previous description he had obtained to be Clay Rand. Rand's wedge-shaped face was flushed with whisky and his tongue was thick. The other man was Ben Dura.

"Where is she," Dura demanded, "and when will she be back?"

Clay Rand spread talonlike hands. "I don't know. She don't pay much attention to what I say any more. Yuh'd think I wasn't her boss."

"Yuh're not," growled Dura. "Yuh're only her guardian. And yuh won't be that six months from now when she comes of age. Yuh've drunk up and gambled away a lot of her property, Rand, and yuh'll likely be called on to account for it. Yuh'd better be reasonable."

Rand hoisted the jug and drank deeply from it.

"Blast it, Ben, I am bein' reasonable!" he whined. "But this is risky business, sellin' a girl. Why—why, folks'd string me up, for shore, if they heard about it! A thousand dollars ain't much when yuh think of it."

"Five hundred," Dura said coldly. "And that's just a gift. I could just take her, yuh know."

"Not without my consent! I'm her legal guardian."

"Yuh're a thievin', hootch-guzzlin' skunk!" Dura sneered. "With or without yore consent, I'm takin' her!"

The Masked Rider lowered his eyes from the window, head on one side like a wild animal keening the breeze. A fierce anger was drumming through him now. But he had heard something else, far out in the shadows which had taken his attention from the man. A thud of hoofs.

It was, he surmised, Sue Worth returning home.

He placed his eyes to the crack again. Rand was leaning across the table, a dogged, defiant light in his pale eyes, a sneer twisting his thin lips.

"Yuh're makin' big tracks awful quick, Ben," he jibed. "You ain't top dog on this range yet, and won't be if Dan Borders ain't took care of."

"Dan Borders," Dura said stonily, "is dead. The jigger claimin' to be Dan is a fake."

"He's Dan Borders, all right," snapped Rand, "and yuh cussed well know it! And when folks find out the truth about Cash Borders, yuh won't be arguin' about what price to pay for somethin' yuh want."

"Clay," Dura said, with deadly calm, "some day yuh'll open that foul mouth once too often, and I'll fill it full of lead! And I'm tired of arguin'. Yuh'll take five hundred, or nothin'!"

"A thousand," Rand whined again. "A man's got to—"

"Listen!" Dura interrupted.

"A bronc," Rand said. "Likely it's the gal comin' back from wherever she's been. I'll take the hide off her."

"Two hosses," Dura grunted. "Was she alone?"

"Far as I know. She was sweet on Dan Borders. Mebbe it's him with her."

Dura got up abruptly from the table. "Stay right here, and don't let on," he said to Rand. "Drink out of that jug."

THE Anvil man wheeled and went through a doorway at the side of the room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

The Masked Rider pulled back from the window. With his ears he had followed the approach of the two horses. They had stopped in front of the house, on the opposite side from the masked man. He could hear low voices.

The Masked Rider hesitated, uncertain. It was unlikely that Dan Borders would be so foolhardy as to leave his hideout. But, if so, he should be warned of his danger. Beyond the fact that one of the voices at the front of the house was that of Sue Worth, however, he could tell nothing.

As he stood undecided, he heard two pairs of boots cross the porch and enter the front part of the house. He placed his eyes to the slit under the curtain again. Clay Rand sat with the demijohn tilted to his lips.

The footsteps were advancing without stealth or hurry through the house. A shock went through the Masked Rider, as Sue Worth and Dan Borders walked into the room. Dan stopped near the doorway and looked with obvious distaste at Rand.

Rand swiped a sleeve across his lips. "Why, hello, Dan," he said. "I thought yuh'd left us."

"I come back for my warbag, Clay," Dan grunted.

"Why, shore. It's in the room where

yuh left it. I heard about yore hard luck. Where yuh holin' up?"

The Masked Rider saw Sue glance warningly at Dan.

"Oh, out in the roughs," Dan said carelessly.

The Masked Rider drew one of his guns, and waited. Dura was in that dark side room, and Dura would step out any second now. The masked man wanted to find out what Dura would do and say. Maybe Dura, thinking Dan was helpless, would say something which would clear up some of the mystery.

Dan Borders had his back turned almost fully to that side door. He was saying something to Sue, when Ben Dura suddenly appeared in the doorway.

Dura had a gun in his hand, and his dark face was set in cold, wicked lines as he raised the gun deliberately.

In that instant the Masked Rider knew he had made a mistake. Dura meant to shoot Borders down in cold blood! He would be in the clear, for Dan Borders was a wanted man.

Sue saw Dura, and screamed.

The masked man's gun blazed and roared through the window. The bullet drove Dura's gun from his hand and against the wall, then to the floor.

Following hard on the shot, the Masked Rider ripped the curtain aside and swung through the window behind his smoking gun. Dura stood frozen, staring with shocked surprise at his empty hand.

Rand had jumped to his feet, overturning the jug. Dan Borders had wheeled, was reaching in slow motion for his own gun. Sue stood as if petrified.

As the window curtain was ripped aside, Dura jerked his head about and stared with wild surprise at that black-garbed, figure wearing the batlike cape.

"I could have killed yuh just as well, Dura!" the Masked Rider spat out at the Anvil foreman. "And I should have. Any low-lived skunk that'd shoot a man in the back—"

Dura whirled with amazing quickness, and lunged back through the doorway into the dark room. The masked man, the hammer of his six already eared back, held his fire. After all, Dura had committed no crime for which he could be held liable to the law.

He heard the hammer of Dura's boots across the dark room, and leaped across to the doorway. Dura was rushing through the front part of the house now. The Masked Rider followed more slowly in the dark, since he was not familiar with the place.

By the time he reached the front door Dura was in the saddle and racing away, a vague, fast-moving shape in the night.

Again the mystery rider held his fire. He wanted a talk with Dura, but the only way he could stop the Anvil man now was by killing him, and he wasn't sure enough of his ground to do that. He listened to the hoofbeats recede and die, then turned back into the house.

Clay Rand was slumped beside the table.

"Blast yuh, Clay, yuh set this trap for me!" Dan Borders was accusing him bitterly. "Yuh meant for Dura to salt me!"

"Yuh got me wrong, Dan," Rand protested hoarsely. "How did I know yuh was comin' here? I was scared to speak up, 'cause Ben would have cut down on me!"

RAND'S long face blanched as the Masked Rider came back into the room.

"I owe yuh another one, Masked Rider," Dan said. "That busky meant to make cold meat out of me."

"He *will* make slab meat out of yuh," the Robin Hood rider said flatly, "if yuh keep on makin' fool plays like this!"

"It won't happen ag'in," Dan promised, half-sheepishly. "I can see now it was a loco thing to do."

The cold eyes behind the mask riveted Clay Rand like the point of a knife blade.

"As for you, Rand," the masked man aid, "I heard what you and Dura talked about. I warn yuh. Go any further with that business and I'll kill yuh like the mangy dog yuh are!"

"I—I promise, Masked Rider," Rand whispered. "I won't have anything else to do with Ben Dura. I wasn't in earnest, anyhow."

The masked man turned his back contemptuously on the cringing rancher.

"I think yuh'll be safe enough here," he said to Sue. "But help won't be far away if yuh need it. As for you, Dan—I'd advise yuh to get out of here."

"Yuh can depend on it, and pronto!"

The Masked Rider wheeled abruptly, stepped through the window into darkness. He slid silently through the shadows, circled the rail corral and, guided by Midnight's soft whinny came up to the stallion. He quickly mounted and headed southward, toward the camp on Williwaw Creek.

There he told Blue Hawk what had happened.

"Dura's an unprincipled skunk, that's plain enough," he declared grimly. "But that don't prove he's a criminal. I'd like to have a talk with him, and mebbe see that will he claims Cash Borders left. And no better time than now."

"Where do you hope to find the Senor Dura?"

"At the Anvil, likely. If not there, in town. He was pretty bad spooked when he left Rand's place."

"And I, Senor?" the Yaqui asked hopefully.

The masked man grinned. "Mebbe yuh better come with me, Hawk. I don't expect trouble, but yuh never can tell. Get ready to ride."

"Bueno!"

Blue Hawk leaped to obey, and shortly they were angling to the southwest across the timber-laced valley floor, toward the headquarters of the great Anvil spread. Night lay like a vast purple shroud over the basin, with a chill wind running through the trees, as they approached the Anvil.

The main building was a vast, two-story structure built like a fortress. The building huddled among giant cottonwoods, at the head of a huge earthen dam behind which lay millions of gallons of clear, sparkling water.

At the base of this dam, which formed a pit that was filled with indigo shadows, the Masked Rider called a halt. Light glowed behind thin curtains in a front room on the lower floor of the ranchhouse. Boisterous sound came from the lighted bunkhouse fifty yards away, where the tough Anvil riders were carousing.

"Wait here, Hawk," the Masked Rider instructed. "I'll signal if I need yuh."

"Si, Senor. I will wait and watch."

The man in black vanished almost instantly, merging with the inky shadows as he went toward the ranch buildings. He gained a pole corral and eased along it toward the front of the ranchhouse. He knew that here he was in deadly danger, for the Masked Rider, with a fortune in bounties on his head, was fair game wherever he was discovered!

CHAPTER X

Gun Law

FROM near the corral, a line of cedars marched like a column of soldiers right up to the wide veranda that extended entirely across the front of the ranchhouse. The black-garbed man gained these cedars, and crouched at the end of the porch.

The lighted room was at this corner of the building, with a window only a few feet away. Midway of the veranda was a doorway which apparently opened into a hallway that bisected the lower floor. Between the masked man and the door was another window, fronting on the veranda. From it came that orange glow of light through thin curtains.

Before the bunkhouse a group of riders were gathered, laughing and talking and indulging in horse-play. If they suspected his presence, the mystery rider knew, their horse-play would change abruptly to a dirge of roaring guns and whining lead.

Keeping behind the cedars, he eased over to the side window. Through a slit in the curtain he could see a portion of the lighted room. He could see Ben Dura, seated at a a scarred desk, a whisky bottle before him. Dura's dark face was set in lines of anger. Apparently, he was alone in the room.

The Masked Rider returned to the end of the veranda. Somehow he had to get into that room, and the only way he knew was through the front door. But to reach that doorway he would have to cross the porch, suffused with light from the window, and therein lay the danger. The gun toughs at the bunkhouse would be almost certain to spot his weird, black-garbed figure.

He crouched there a while longer, trying to reach a solution. The wind rustled the cedars. Back in the timber a great horned owl gave its savage hunting cry.

Suddenly he tensed, as the low sound of music came to his ears. It was a harmonica, sending out of the near shadows the soft notes of a melancholy range song. Then he heard the low thuds of a horse's hoofs.

That harmonica player could be only one man: The fat, joke-telling undertaker, Stone Cady. The music drew nearer, the melancholy sound seeming to merge with the night and become a part of its magic—the magic of shadows and starlight and wind in the trees.

Then, as horse and rider approached the ranchhouse and halted at a tie-rack not twenty feet from the Masked Rider, the music stopped. The masked man saw that the rider was, indeed, Stone Cady. He heard the undertaker grunt as he heaved himself down from the saddle. What, he wondered, was Cady doing at the Anvil?

Apparently the riders at the bunkhouse were paying no attention to Cady, which gave rise to the speculation that his visit here was nothing unusual. Cady tied his horse, turned, and went toward the veranda steps. To reach the steps he would have to pass within five feet of the Masked Rider.

The Robin Hood Rider drew his gun and, as Cady came even with him, he jumped suddenly from the dark cedars and slid in close to the waddling figure.

He jammed the gun-muzzle against Cady's broad, spongy back.

"Keep on walkin', fat man, and stay quiet," he whispered, "or I'll put yuh on a lead plum diet!"

A tremor ran through the undertaker's huge frame, and he twisted his head to stare back at the black-garbed figure that was pressed closely against him. He blinked, showing little surprise and no fear at all.

"The Masked Rider, huh?" he grunted. "What kind of game's this yuh playin'?"

"No game," the masked man whispered bleakly. "I crave to get into that room where Dura is, and I couldn't without them punchers seein' me."

"Just foller me," Cady chuckled. "Glad to oblige. Some day I may get paid for buryin' yuh!"

Pressed closely against the fat man, so that to anybody more than a few yards away they must have looked like one figure, the Masked Rider followed Cady across the porch, through the doorway, and into a shadowy corridor. Cady paused before a door where a sliver of light showed at the bottom.

Answering a pressure of the gun against his back, Cady tapped on the door, and Dura's surly voice sounded inside.

"Who is it?"

"Me, Stone, come for that poker party," Cady said.

"Come on in," Dura growled.

CADY pushed open the door and went into the big, lighted room, followed closely by the Masked Rider. The Masked Rider shoved the door to, stepped out from behind Cady, the gun still in hand.

Dura jumped as if a lighted cigarette had touched him as he saw that sinister, black-clad figure. His jaw dropped loosely as surprise made its pattern over his dark face. Then his hand slashed toward a desk drawer.

"I wouldn't, Dura!" The Masked Rider's low voice was glacier-cold. "Let the gun alone, and talk low. If a ruckus starts, I'll see yuh get yores first!"

Dura darted a bitter, accusing glance at Cady.

Cady spread fat hands. "Sorry, Ben," he wheezed. "I don't argue with a six, especially when it's in the Masked Rider's hand. I come out for that poker date. Doc Wind and Gunderson ought to be along right soon."

"What do you want here?" Dura snarled suddenly at the Masked Rider. "I've got about enough of yore cussed interference!"

"Yuh're liable to get more!" the masked man snapped. "But right now all I want is a little pow-wow with yuh. Yuh was in such a hurry at Clay Rand's place I didn't get a chance."

Cady watched this, puzzled. "I don't crave to butt in on private affairs, gents," he wheezed, "I'll just mosey on."

"There's a chair," the Masked Rider clipped. "Stay here!"

Cady crossed and lowered himself ponderously to the chair.

Dura was watching the masked man with a wary interest. He had regained a measure of composure and confidence.

"Yuh seem to have a habit of meddlin' in other folks' business," he sneered.

"It's a bad habit. All right, get it over with. What do yuh want?"

"I know you killed Cash Borders—or had it done—but how did yuh fake that will?"

Dura laughed mockingly. "So that's it! Yuh're a fool after all, Masked Rider. Yuh actually believe that scar-faced jasper is Dan Borders, and that I'm tryin' to pull somethin' crooked?"

"That's the hunch I'm ridin'. What I saw and heard at Clay Rand's place earlier tonight made me more than ever shore."

"That's no proof of anything. Shore, I want the girl—who wouldn't? I'm in love with her, want to marry her. As for Dan Tabor—what do you care what happens to him?"

"The same as I'd care about what happens to any decent, honest man who's bein' crowded by a bunch of snakes. And if yuh're about to try to buy me off, don't! A Conestoga full of gold couldn't tempt me to fight on the side of evil and injustice!"

Dura laughed again, but his face flushed angrily.

"That's a swell sermon, comin' from the Masked Rider—from a jigger that's wanted for every crime in the book, from robbery to cold-blooded killin'."

"Some of those 'crimes', Dura," the Masked Rider said coldly, "were killin' skunks like you!"

Cady stirred heavily. "Gents," he said, "what's all this about? Ben, if yuh're up to pullin' somethin' crooked—well, all me and the others wanted was a little poker playin'."

"There's nothin' crooked," Dura declared angrily. "The Masked Rider's just been listenin' to a pack of lies. You saw that will made out and signed, Cady. You know it's on the level."

"Where is that will?" the Masked Rider asked abruptly.

"Right over there in that safe," Dura jerked his head toward a squat iron safe in a corner of the room. "I meant to carry it to town tomorrow and have it probated."

"Get it!"

Dura hesitated, then got up, crossed to the safe, and knelt before it. His fingers worked deftly at the combination, and the safe door creaked open. The masked man watched Dura warily as he opened a small steel box and took from it a folded sheet of paper.

Dura recrossed the room and tossed the paper with a sardonic smile on the desk before the Masked Rider.

"Now some samples of Cash Borders' writing," ordered the black-clad man.

DURA shrugged, took several other slips of paper from a desk drawer and tossed them on the desk. The Masked Rider looked them over, saw that they were papers pertaining to ranch matters, that they had Cash Borders' name on them and were undoubtedly in the rancher's own writing.

Then he picked up the will.

"I think yuh'll find the writin' tallies," Dura sneered.

The will, although crudely phrased, had the appearance of legality. It had been signed by Cash Borders, and stated, in effect, that he willed everything he owned to Ben Dura. Either Cash Borders had written and signed the document or it was an amazingly clever forgery.

"Satisfied?" Dura asked mockingly. "Cady, is that the paper you and Al Caspin witnessed?"

"I reckon it is."

A baffled feeling lifted inside the Masked Rider. Was he, after all, on the wrong trail? If this will was genuine, then Dura would have no reason at all to kill his employer.

"Satisfied for the moment, Dura," he said grimly. "But this ain't the last—"

He broke off, head on one side, listening. Again he heard the sound—the mournful, drawn-out howl of a wolf.

"Spooky of a timber wolf, Masked Rider?" Dura jeered. "The critters come up in the yard every night. Mebbe there're some more things yuh'd like to know."

The man in black backed toward the door. He knew what that wolf howl meant. It was Blue Hawk's danger signal!

He opened the door, slid through into the hallway, closed the door. Warned by some intuition, he whirled, flinging himself to one side.

A gun blasted almost in his face, spouting flame and lead over his shoulder as he fell. In the gunpowder torch he saw

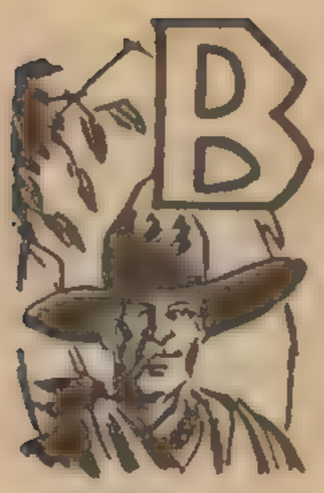
the waspy figure of Al Caspin standing in the doorway that opened onto the porch.

From his prone position, the Masked Rider fired upward. But with a wild yell of alarm Caspin had flung himself back through the doorway, and his boot-heels hammered as he crossed the porch.

The Robin Hood Rider leaped to his feet and toward the door. But the instant he showed himself in the opening, guns sent out their savage brawling into the night, the bullets slashing into the door jamb inches from his head.

CHAPTER XI

Masked Rider at Bay



BITTER realization that he had walked into a trap gripped the Masked Rider. He wheeled back. The door to the lighted room opened slightly, framing Ben Dura, and the masked man drove a hurried bullet at him.

He missed, and Dura ducked back, leaving the door ajar. His taunting voice came to the mystery rider:

"You won't leave here alive, Masked Rider! I figgered mebbe yuh'd follow me here from Rand's place, so I baited a little trap for yuh. Guns are waitin' for yuh and the front and back both!"

The masked man ran on past the door, knowing that by now Dura had a weapon and would be waiting to gun him down as he entered the room. Nor did he doubt the truth of Dura's statement that Anvil guns were waiting at the back as well as the front.

He was trapped! Escape by either the front or back seemed impossible.

Dura was bawling orders from the front room. The gunfire had stopped outside, but he could hear stridently yelling voices at both the front and back of the big old house.

In the half-light from the doorway he saw the base of a stairway that wound upward to the second story. Without hesitation the Masked Rider bounded up these stairs, stumbling in the dark, clutching at the bannister for support. Reaching the top of the stairs, he was forced to risk striking a match.

He found himself in another, shorter hallway, with doorways showing on each side of it. He pinched out the match, groped his way forward until his fingers found a doorknob. He opened the door and slid through into the room.

Across the room was the square of gray half-light of a window. He crossed the room, which seemed empty, and knelt beside the open window.

He was on the side of the house by which he had entered. Below and to his left were the cedars. Farther out, beyond the corrals, he could see the sparkle of starlight on water. In between was the dam, with its pit of shadows on this side, where he had left Blue Hawk with the horses.

The Yaqui had not deserted him, and would not. Blue Hawk was out there somewhere, watching, waiting his chance to aid his cornered trailmate.

Somewhere below, Dura's outraged shout lifted.

"Close in, you buskies—close in! That masked devil's still in the house somewhere. A thousand dollars to the jigger that downs him!"

The Masked Rider knew he had to leave here, and quickly, if he hoped to live. If Dura's men captured him they would show him no mercy. He was a wanted outlaw—and now there was Dura's bounty offer on his dead body!

The Robin Hood Rider thrust his head and shoulders through the window, and from his lips there suddenly came a shrill, piercing whistle.

Almost instantly, above the pandemonium below, there was an eager whinny, and a swift clatter of hoofs. Out of the darkness at the base of the dam hurtled a powerful, shadowy figure that drove straight toward the ranchhouse. Midnight circled the big corral, reached the far end of the line of cedars, and paused uncertainly.

The man in black repeated the signal.

The great stallion wheeled and raced straight for the sound.

"What's that—who's on that hoss?" a voice shouted.

"It's the Masked Rider's black stud!" another voice—Al Caspin's—cried. "Don't let him get in close to the house!"

Guns beat a devil's tattoo in the night.

But Midnight, apparently unhit, drove straight on, hoofs churning the turf. At

another low signal, he swerved slightly, and halted directly below the window where the man in black crouched.

The Masked Rider thrust the upper portion of his body through the window, feet braced on the sill.

The confusion below had increased. Guns roared, men shouted, boots thudded against the earth. Above the tumult a long, eerie, savage yell sounded.

The Masked Rider smiled grimly. That was Blue Hawk's battle cry, the war cry of his fierce ancestors!

And now he dimly saw a racing, weaving shadow dart out of the pit shadows at the base of the dam and drive straight at the Anvil gunmen grouped at the back of the ranchhouse, purple-red flame funneling from the rifle in his hands. The sudden appearing of that yelling, shooting, wild-riding figure threw the gunmen into confusion. They scattered, yelling and cursing.

BLUE Hawk, the Masked Rider knew, was creating this diversion, risking his own life, to give the man in black his chance for escape.

The Robin Hood Rider braced himself, and leaped, his cape billowing outward as he sailed through the air like a huge bat. He landed light as a feather in the saddle. Midnight reared, dancing his exultant jig, trembling with eagerness.

The Masked Rider spoke softly into the big stallion's ear, and as Midnight's front hoofs touched the ground he was in a dead run. Like a dark thunderbolt he shot along the wall and into the open beyond the corner of the house. Yelling, cursing men scurried before him.

Twin guns were in the Masked Rider's hands now, kicking and blazing, adding their deep-throated bellowing to the thunder from Blue Hawk's carbine. The night was turned more and more tumultuous by the gunfire and the shocked, outraged yells of the Anvil men. Gunsmoke rolled in acrid clouds, and lead hissed its wicked song of death.

Dura's maddened bellow rose above this wild racketing:

"There they go—don't let 'em get away! *Two* thousand to the man that brings me the Masked Rider's ears!"

But by now the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had joined forces. They swerved slightly, cutting again through a segment of the demoralized Anvil gunnies, guns blazing out their red rage. Side by side they raced for the head of the dam.

For an instant, the staring, swearing Anvil men saw them again—two graceful, fast-moving shadows etched darkly against the starlit night sky as they raced along the crest of the dam. Then they vanished into the far timber. . . .

The next morning Wayne Morgan saddled the roan and made a leisurely circle over the range, with the intention of eventually paying Jericho Jenkins another visit. He wanted to make sure the old horse hunter was all right, and he wanted another talk with Jericho.

There was little doubt now in Morgan's mind of Ben Dura's full guilt. But there was something here that didn't quite track, something he couldn't put his finger on. A lot hinged on whether the will he had seen the night before was genuine or not. It certainly appeared to be, and he doubted whether Dura, plainly not an eduacted man, had the ability for such a clever forgery.

Again, it was obvious that Dura himself could not have locked Cash Borders inside the burning cabin. Dura, according to Sheriff Jack, had been playing poker in Monument at the time.

Morgan had been riding along a weed-grown road in the general direction of Jericho Jenkins' horse camp when his eyes suddenly narrowed as he saw three horses coming along the trail toward him. Topping two of the horses were Sheriff Lute Jacks and Ben Dura.

The third horse was being led by Sheriff Jacks, and draped across it was a still, blanket-covered figure.

Morgan pulled to the side of the trail as Jacks and Dura rode up to him, and halted. The sheriff was sober-faced, while Dura stared at Morgan with cold expressionless eyes.

"What yuh got there?" Morgan asked curiously.

"Jericho Jenkins!" the sheriff grunted.

Morgan concealed the shock that went through him.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Why, looks like Jericho was tromped to death by that big palomino stud he's been tryin' to tame up there in his corral. Ben here rode up to see Jericho early

this mornin', and found him lyin' in the corral, tromped to pieces."

Dura nodded. "Jericho had a little run in with Al Caspin and some of the boys yesterday," he said smoothly. "Al had gone against my orders and told Jericho to clear out, so I rode up there to tell him to stay. What I found wasn't pretty. But it was plain what had happened. Jericho had gone into the corral, on foot, and that palomino hellion had turned on him and tromped him."

"I warned Jericho about that wild stud," the sheriff said heavily. "I told him he was gettin' too old and stove-up to monkey with dynamite like that."

"Jericho knew that stud was a killer," Morgan said softly. "It looks funny, him goin' into a corral with the stud without a hoss between his legs."

"Likely he was drunk," Dura said carelessly. "There was a whisky bottle on the ground outside the corral."

"Gettin' drunk and windin' up dead seems to be a habit of folks around here!" Morgan said bluntly.

"Meanin' what, drifter?" demanded Dura.

"Meanin' that I think, drunk or sober, Jericho Jenkins would have had more sense than to go into a corral afoot with that devil hoss!"

"Mebbe yuh think I'm lyin'," Dura sneered. "Mebbe yuh think the stud didn't kill him?"

Morgan shrugged. "What I think is my own business."

DURA'S long lips curled downward at the corners, and he laid his intent, calculating stare on the tall cowboy. Morgan returned that arrogant stare impudently, the desire for violence building up higher and higher inside him.

"I think," Dura murmured, "yuh're not so much a drifter as yuh claim, Morgan."

Unaware of the tension that had built up, Jacks said, "Well, let's be gettin' on to town."

The sheriff and Dura rode on along the trail with their grisly burden, and Morgan watched them as they rounded a corner. He sat his saddle with his forehead creased with thought, jarred by what had happened. His conviction that old Jericho had not been killed by the wild stallion was a persistent, clamoring thing inside him.

Finally he turned the roan and rode at a gallop toward the hills.

It was midafternoon when he reached Monument on the return trip. His dark eyes and clean-cut face were grim as he tied the roan at a tie-rack and turned along the plank walk toward the sheriff's office.

"Morgan—just a minute!" a voice called.

Morgan looked up and saw a sign suspended from the front of a building he was passing:

BLACKSTONE JEFFERSON CADY
Funeral Arrangements
Coffins and Hardware

Stone Cady waddled out of the doorway. He looked both ways along the street, his pendulous jaws flopping, soberness on his florid features.

"Morgan," the undertaker said swiftly, "I'd advise yuh to get out of town, quick! Plumb out of the country, in fact."

"Why should I?" Morgan asked coolly.

"Because there's a busky in town lookin' for yuh! Calls himself Red John Dante, and he looks plenty salty."

"What does he want?"

"He wants to kill yuh! Claims yuh shot his pardner in the back up in Montana six months ago, and he's been trailin' yuh ever since. Says he aims to shoot yuh on sight!"

A warning caution plucked at Morgan's nerves.

"What does this Red John Dante look like?" he asked calmly.

"Lanky, red-haired, like a tomcat that's been sleepin' out in the brush. Wears two forty-fours, tied down. He's been drinkin' rot gut all day, and talkin' mean about what he aims to do to yuh. No doubt about it, Morgan, he's a *malo* hombre, and he means business. Yuh better fork yore bronc and ride!"

"I've got business here in town," Morgan drawled, and added curiously, "Why're yuh tellin' me all this?"

"Because I kind of took a likin' to yuh, that's all," Cady wheezed. "It's no business of mine. I figger if yuh salted this busky's pard yuh had a good reason for it. Red John's down in the Cattle King.

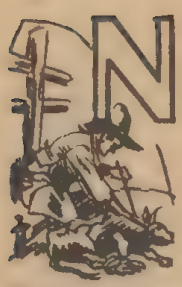
Yuh've still got time to run for it. This red-haired jigger's a killer, I tell yuh!"

Morgan grinned. "Mebbe later. Thanks anyway, Cady!"

He turned and went on along the walk, while Cady scuttled back into his funeral parlor.

CHAPTER XII

The Red Killer



NOT until now did Morgan suddenly become aware that the street was oddly deserted, although numerous horses stood at tie racks. He saw faces at windows staring out at him. Tension hovered in the air like a tangible substance.

Trained in the rough, sometimes brutal school of frontier experience, Wayne Morgan's nerves twisted to a greater and greater tautness. He had never heard of "Red John" Dante, and he hadn't been in Montana in more than a year.

He entered the courthouse and climbed the stairs to the sheriff's office, where he found Sheriff Jacks alone. The lawman greeted Morgan sourly, frowningly.

"I been thinkin', Morgan," he growled. "Since you showed up here we've had two deaths, and you seem pretty much interested in both of 'em. And now there's liable to be another one—yores. Yuh know there's a gent in town lookin' for yuh?"

"Just heard it," Morgan said.

"I won't stand for no more trouble," the sheriff warned angrily, shaking a finger at Morgan. "I'll jail the one that starts it. Yuh better hightail out of town, Morgan, for yore own good. Red John kills yuh, yuh're long dead—you kill Red John, and I'll jail yuh!"

"Sheriff," Morgan said, "that stud didn't kill old Jericho."

"Bah!" Jacks growled. "Yuh aim to start that ag'in?"

"I rode out there," Morgan continued grimly. "I know he was tromped by the stud, all right. But he was already dead. Somebody killed him before they tossed him into the corral!"

"What in thunderation makes yuh think that?"

"There'd been some kind of ruckus inside Jericho's cabin," Morgan declared. "There was a splotch of blood on the floor, another on the door facin'—like somebody had been dragged through the doorway—and still another on the ground in front of the cabin. Between the shack and corral there were signs like somethin' had been dragged. How come yuh missed all that?"

The sheriff scowled, grunted skeptically.

"Yuh been chewin' loco weed, cowboy," he said. "Now about this Red John busky—"

"He was dragged to the corral and tossed into it with the Palomino," Morgan went on grimly. "Mebbe dead, mebbe only unconscious. Whoever done it had tormented the stud until he was killin' mad, and he done the rest. One thing, Jericho never knew what was happenin'."

"Likely not, because he was too drunk! Morgan, I'm warnin' yuh—don't have any trouble in my town! If you killed this Red John Dante's pard, like he claims, yuh'd better ride out!"

Anger sharp and wicked inside him, Morgan got to his feet. He knew that Jericho Jenkins had been killed, but he knew there was no use in trying to convince the thick-minded sheriff of the fact.

"A man lookin' for trouble," he said bleakly, "is like a hound dog with a bone!"

He wheeled out of the office and went down to the street. He met paunchy, bearded old Doc Wind, just starting into the courthouse. The little medico caught Morgan's arm as he started to brush past him.

"I was looking for you, Morgan," Doc Wind said, in a low, hurried tone. "I saw you come up here."

"I reckon,"—Morgan grinned crookedly,—"yuh're fixin' to tell me about Red John gunnin' for me, and warn me to get out of town."

"So you know." The goateed little medico nodded with relief. "I meant to warn you against this Red John Dante, but not to advise you to run, exactly. I happen to know that Dante is a paid killer, a fast and dangerous man with a gun. And it looks like he has you marked for death. It's a put-up job."

"I'd already figgered it that way," Morgan said quietly. "He's usin' that hogwash about me killin' his saddle pard just as an

excuse to gun me. Stone Cady warned me about him."

DOC WIND looked thoughtfully through his thick spectacles at the tall rider.

"I fear," he said drily, "that our friend Cady's motives were not altogether altruistic. Cady and Ben Dura are good friends. Something else you possibly didn't know, Morgan, is that Stone Cady once served a prison sentence for forgery. In fact, I believe I am the only other person in Monument who knows. Cady, I have heard, is clever with a pen. I thought, under the circumstances, you might be interested in knowing these things."

Morgan said, softly, "Yeah, I'm *plumb* interested."

"This morning," the medico murmured, turning to go, "I saw Dura and this Red John killer with their heads close together in the Cattle King."

"Thanks, Doc," Morgan said gently, earnestly. "Yuh've done me a big favor."

Doc Wind continued into the courthouse, and Morgan stepped onto the board walk. The town was quiet. Although he was alone in the street, he could feel the impact of eyes upon him. Monument was waiting for a man to die.

He thought of what Doc Wind had just said, especially the part about Stone Cady having served a sentence for forgery. That could explain a lot. He thought of the sly, cruel something that lay half-seen always just below the fat undertaker's jolly nature.

He thought of Red John Dante, the paid killer, and knew with a crystal clarity that this was a death-trap set for him.

Dura and Cady were in this together, and they were getting panicky. They had killed Jericho Jenkins for fear of what he might know. Now they wanted him, Morgan, dead, because he was meddling in their affairs and because Jericho might have told him something.

The anger inside Morgan blazed higher. It was his nature to meet trouble more than halfway, and this was no exception.

He wheeled and went along the walk, his boots thudding solidly against the boards, sounding incredibly loud in the silent town. He came to the Cattle King, turned in, pushed open the batwings and entered.

Less than a dozen men were in the big room. They were at tables scattered over the room, but they were not playing or drinking. Taut-faced, silent, they watched him as he stood just inside the doorway.

Morgan's gaze riveted instantly on a man who stood alone at the bar, a whisky glass in his hand. This man was slat-thin, with unkempt red hair, with hatchet features that held cunning and evil and sadistic cruelty. He looked, as Cady had said, "like a tomcat that had slept in the brush."

Here was Red John Dante. Here was a man who killed for profit and for the animal pleasure he derived from it.

Red John watched Morgan with a speculative, half-eager intensity in his yellowish eyes as the wandering waddy crossed to the end of the bar. He stopped ten feet from Red John, and turned fully facing him, that revulsion for all things evil running like a warm tide through him.

"My name's Morgan," he said levelly. "I hear yuh're lookin' for me, bucko."

Red John placed his glass on the bar, never taking his flame-flecked eyes off Morgan, and took an outward step.

"I know you, Morgan," Red John said harshly. "I saw yuh once, up in Montana, the day before yuh shot my saddlemate in the back from a cutbank. I been trailin' yuh ever since, and just now caught up with yuh!"

Morgan stood planted solidly. He knew he was facing a cunning, deadly gunfighter. Red John was not drunk at all. He was coldly sober and calculating as he measured his victim.

"Here I am," Morgan said.

"And I aim to tally yuh!" Red John snarled. "Only I won't do it in the back like yuh done my pard."

"Red John," Morgan said coldly, deliberately, "yuh're a lyin', low-down skunk! Anybody as snake mean as you never had a pard!"

FOR ten seconds there was stark silence in the room. Red John's thin body fell into a half-crouch, his clawlike right hand hovering over his low-thonged silver-handled .44. The pale yellow fury ablaze in his eyes was wholly wicked.

His thin voice had a ragged edge:

"Hombre, I got witnesses yuh asked for it. When yuh killed my pard—"

Morgan's voice was like a whiplash. "Draw!"

Red John's stabbing hand was a blur in the half-gloom.

Fast, that gaunt red killer . . . but not quite fast enough. His .44 muzzle had cleared leather and was rising when Morgan's black .45 blasted out its red song of death.

Red John's bullet slashed into the floor as he came unhinged at the middle. He lifted his unkempt red head and stared through gunsmoke at Morgan, a dismal gray knowledge washing over his thin face, that yellow and wicked fury draining from his eyes. Then he sank down to the sawdust, never to move again.

Morgan holstered his gun and looked slowly about the room, the old regret at having to take life heavy inside him.

"It was him or me," he said.

Boots thudded heavily along the walk, and the batwings flapped open to admit Sheriff Jacks. He glowered about the room, his heavy face like a thundercloud, his gaze riveting finally on the still figure on the floor. He crossed to the figure and knelt for a brief examination.

"Another dead man," he grumbled. He straightened, and with ponderous certainty drew his gun. "I warned yuh, Morgan. Now I've got to jail yuh!"

"On what charge?" Morgan asked reasonably. "This busky called for a showdown and went for his hogleg first. Any man in this room will tell yuh that."

There was a general nodding of heads among the spectators.

"That's right, Sheriff," a puncher said. "That red-haired jigger was bent on a killin'. Morgan's in the clear."

"A jury'll decide that," Sheriff Jacks said doggedly, "I got plenty to do without havin' to be all time ridin' herd on you, Morgan, what with all these killin's, and that devilish Masked Rider takin' prisoners out from under my nose. That hellion Dan Tabor is still on the loose, too."

"His name's Dan Borders," Morgan grunted. "Sheriff, when yuh aim to wake up?"

"I'm awake enough to slam you in a cell!" the lawman said angrily. He jabbed the gun-muzzle at Morgan. "Head out for the jail, and don't try no tricks!"

Morgan's lips bunched at the corners. He had no doubt that if he went to jail he would be freed in time. But time was a precious commodity now. Those arrayed against him were getting panicky—and panicky men did desperate, violent things.

Both Dan Borders and Sue Worth were in deadly danger, and he couldn't help them if he were in jail.

"Sheriff," he said earnestly, "can't you see this was a framed job? I never killed Red John's pard, never heard of him before. He was bein' paid to salt me."

"By who?"

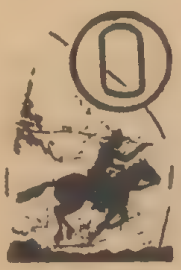
Morgan opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. He had no real proof against Dura or anybody else. Besides, to reveal that he knew too much might do more harm than it did good. The sheriff was too bull-headed to take any stock in what he said.

"I don't know," he said lamely. "I just figgered somebody did."

"Get out that door!" the sheriff ordered flatly. "I'll be right behind yuh with this smoke pole in yore back!"

CHAPTER XIII

Dead Man's Clue



OBEDIENTLY Morgan turned and walked toward the batwings, merely shrugging. He could hear the solid thump of Sheriff Jacks' boots close behind him. He put both hands against the batwings, pushed them open and went through—and as he did he suddenly leaped forward, slamming the batwing doors violently into Sheriff Jacks' face!

He heard a grunt, heard the sheriff yell out his alarm, and then a thud as the lawman tumbled backward to the floor. He heard a wild scrambling and swearing.

But he had already leaped across the board walk, ducked under the hitchrack where the roan stood ground-hitched, and was in the saddle. The roan whirled in its tracks and in three jumps was in a dead run along the street.

Morgan heard the sheriff's outraged bellow and, looking back, he saw Jack

standing in front of the Cattle King and waving his arms. He saw smoke and flame gout from the sheriff's gun, heard the hissing snarl of lead. But now, racing a zigzag course, he was nearing the upper end of the street.

He flung a last glance backward and saw other men streaming from doorways. He knew that the sheriff, enraged by his humiliation, would quickly have a posse on his trail. The tall rider's lips tightened. It was a new experience to be wanted by the law, both as the Masked Rider and Wayne Morgan, but he particularly disliked the idea now.

He sensed that events in Silvertip Basin were moving swiftly toward a final showdown. The next few days or even hours would see the defeat or triumph of the evil forces that threatened the great Anvil outfit.

Leaving Monument behind, he headed west along the trail, the big roan running swiftly and smoothly. With the start he had there was little danger of the posse catching up with him. But he bitterly regretted the time he must waste in shaking them.

He was less than a mile from town when he saw a spiral of dust lift from the head of the street and move westward. Moving before that dust cloud he saw a dozen black specks that were riders. Sheriff Jacks was wasting no time!

Morgan rode on in the general direction of the camp beside Williwaw Creek. But after a couple more miles he left the trail and veered to the right, more toward Clay Rand's outfit, keeping that mile of distance between him and the posse. The roan was blowing, but still ran effortlessly.

A mile from Rand's place, a voice suddenly called out, "Senor!" and Blue Hawk, mounted on a wiry pinto, rode from among a nest of cliffs.

Morgan halted, and the Yaqui came up to him, his coppery face tense with anxiety.

"Trouble, Senor?"

Morgan grinned tautly. "Might say that."

Quickly he explained what had happened in town.

"So now both Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider are wanted by the law," he finished. "I've got to shake that posse, and to do it I'll have to lead 'em into the hills and wait for dark. You stay in this neck, Hawk, and keep yore eyes peeled for anything that happens. I'll get in touch with yuh as soon as I can."

"*'Sta bueno,*" the Yaqui murmured, and wheeled his pinto and faded back among the screening cliffs.

Morgan rode on, letting the roan run, taking up the slack between himself and the posse. Twenty minutes later he started the climb into the low, timbered foothills. In another hour the sun would be down, spreading its mantle of indigo over the earth. . . .

In the dreary gray mist of dawn Wayne Morgan rose from his bed of pine needles, stretching his cold-cramped limbs and pumping his arms to start the blood to circulating through his chilled frame. He had spent the night in a shallow canyon. Far in the night he had risked kindling a small fire to drive away the bleakness, but now the fire was out and he was cold and hungry.

He had no way of knowing whether the posse had given up the hunt and gone home with darkness, but he figured they had. Anyway, even if he had any desire to do so, he couldn't stay here in the hills without food.

He saddled the roan, mounted and rode toward the lowlands. Impatience was a driving force inside him. He thought that the pattern of what was happening in Silvertip Basin was fairly clear to him now, but he needed proof. He needed to fix it so that Dan Borders and Sue Worth would be safe and in the clear.

HE DIDN'T know just what drew him back to the charred wreckage of the cabin where Cash Borders had perished. Perhaps it was a faint glimmer of hope, a faint conviction that here where the sinister mystery had had its beginning would also be found its solution.

Morgan circled the wreckage, studying it from all angles, marking the spot where Borders' body had lain. The ashes and charred timbers were cold now. He walked among the ruins, raking and kicking among the ashes with his boots, probing with a long stick, his keen eyes missing nothing.

There was the potbellied stove turned on its side. A few fire-blackened cook-

ing utensils, tin cans, bits of broken bottles. A .45 Colt revolver, the cartridges in its chamber exploded.

Then he kicked something else from under the ashes, in almost exactly the spot where Cash Borders had lain. A bowl-shaped battered chunk of metal. Morgan picked the thing up and stared at it curiously.

It was a gold pan such as prospectors had used since the California gold rush. Its bottom was corrugated with concentric circular ridges. Morgan remembered then that Dan Borders had told him that in his younger days Cash Borders had followed the gold trails, and that even in latter years he liked to prowl the basin streams with a gold pan, even though he never found anything except a little color.

Morgan turned the ancient gold pan over—and a startled exclamation escaped his lips. In the sunlight a series of bright scratches showed on the metal bottom of the pan!

Obviously the scratches had been cut into the metal with a nail or some other sharp object. That the scratches had not rusted over was proof of their recent origin. They had escaped the sooting action of the recent flames because the pan had been resting bottomside up.

Morgan studied the crude scratches with a narrower and narrower interest. He began to make out words. And suddenly their stark significance hit him with the impact of a hammering fist. The crudely-scratched words on the bottom of the gold pan leaped out at him with abrupt clarity:

Dura had me locked inside cabin. Cabin afire. Cady forged will. Don't know . . .

The remaining few words were illegible. At the bottom was the barely decipherable name of Cash Borders.

Grim-eyed, but exultant, Morgan left the blackened wreckage. He had what he wanted. He remounted the roan and headed toward Monument. . . .

It was almost noon when Clay Rand reached the Anvil. He was, as usual, half-drunk. But there was a certain arrogance in the way he held himself as he dismounted at the tie-rack, in the way he looked at the small group of low-talking Anvil riders nearby.

"Where's Ben?" he asked.

"Clay, what do yuh want here?" Al Caspin demanded. "You know Dura told yuh to stay away."

"I've got business with him," Rand said importantly. "Mebbe some news he'd like to hear. Where is he?"

"In the house."

Rand swaggered across the veranda and into the hallway. The door to Dura's room was open, and he entered without knocking. Dura looked up from some papers he had been studying, scowling as he saw who it was.

"Get out of here!" he ordered. "Come back when yuh're ready to string along with me."

Rand sat down, grinned a little.

"Ben," he asked, "how much would it be worth to yuh to know where Dan Borders is roostin'?"

Dura's cold black eyes narrowed.

"Dan Tabor, yuh mean?"

Rand's grin broadened. "You and me don't have to play games, Ben. We both know he's Cash Borders' whelp. If I'd had any doubts, I found a letter from his dad in his bedroll. If he ain't killed, Ben, he's liable to tear down yore playhouse."

"Shut up!" Dura spat. "Do yuh know where he is?"

"I didn't ask that! I just asked how much it would be worth to yuh to know."

"Five hundred dollars." Dura got to his feet, the eager, vicious look of a wolf on his face. "And if yuh know somethin', yuh cussed hootch-guzzler, yuh'd better spit it out fast!"

"The five-hundred—"

"When I find out yuh're not lyin', not before! Where is he?"

"I ain't seen him since the other night when the Masked Rider kept yuh from saltin' him," Rand said cautiously. "But I know how yuh can find him. That stepdaughter of mine has been sneakin' grub out to him every day. She'll be headin' out ag'in this afternoon, when she's shore I ain't comin' back. All yuh've got to do is foller her and she'll lead yuh right to him."

Triumph flared in Dura's eyes.

"Yuh'd better be right and yuh'd better not be lyin'!" he said flatly. He wheeled out onto the veranda, bawling, "Al, come in here!"

The waspish gunman left the group and

swaggered over to the veranda.

"Yeah, Boss?"

"Saddle my dun," Dura ordered. "You and Hachita and Chalk-Eye saddle yores. We'll settle this now . . . "

BLUE HAWK, perched high on a ledge among the cliffs overlooking Rand's place, spotted Morgan galloping along the dim trail toward Monument. Grunting with relief, the Yaqui hastily clambered down from the ledge, led his pinto out from a niche in the walls and rode to meet his trailmate.

"Figgered I'd find yuh here, Hawk," Morgan greeted the Indian. "I'm headed into town to see Sheriff Jacks. I've got the deadwood on Dura and Cady now!"

He took from a saddle-bag the battered gold pan and showed Blue Hawk the markings on it, explaining where he had found it. Blue Hawk read the cryptic message, scrawled by a man already doomed, with a grave face.

"Many things are explained," he said.

"That'll put a noose about Dura's neck," Morgan declared grimly. "I could take care of him myself, but I want the law back of me when I brace him."

"The sheriff," Blue Hawk said slowly, "is not in town."

"How yuh know that?"

"Two hours ago I scouted over through the foothills near Tomahawk Canyon. The sheriff is there, readin' sign."

"Still on my cold trail." Morgan grinned.

Blue Hawk shook his head.

"He is following sign left by Dan Borders, or the girl. When I saw him he was close to the mouth of Tomahawk Canyon. But that is not the worst part, Senor."

"What's wrong?" Morgan asked quickly.

"Half an hour ago the Senorita Sue left the ranch, with a grub pack on her saddle. Although she did not know it, she was being followed."

"Who by?" Morgan snapped.

"By six men—Dura, Al Caspin, Clay Rand, Stone Cady and two others. It is plain they suspected the girl was carrying food to Borders, and they intend to trail her to his hideout."

"Yuh know what that means, don't yuh?"

Blue Hawk nodded somberly. "Death for Dan Borders, and perhaps for the senorita also. They could not afford to leave any witnesses alive to talk!"

"Right!" Morgan's brain worked swiftly. "This is the showdown, Hawk. We've got to head for Tomahawk Canyon, fast, and pray we get there in time to save Dan Borders and the girl."

"The roan is tired, Senor."

"I'd thought of that. It's best that I go as the Masked Rider, anyway. It will take only a few minutes to ride to camp and change hosses. Let's go!"

CHAPTER XIV

Desperate Race

RACING along a broad meadow, Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk burst through a belt of timber, and drew up at the camp at the base of the walls beside Williwaw Creek. It took but a moment for them to change saddles and bridles to the big stallion Midnight and Blue Hawk's gray.

Morgan donned the black cape, black mask and black sombrero that magically transformed him into the fabulous Masked Rider. He and the Yaqui leaped into saddles and thundered away from the creek for Tomahawk Canyon, in a wild, desperate race with death.

The Masked Rider knew Blue Hawk had not exaggerated when he had said that both Dan Borders and Sue Worth were in danger of quick death if Dura and his followers succeeded in trailing the girl to Borders' hideout. Dura and Cady had their backs to the wall. They knew that so long as Dan Borders lived they were in danger of exposure and disaster.

Even without the evidence the gold pan bore, the Masked Rider had already guessed that the fat undertaker, Cady, was in this with Dura. The knowledge had come to him, with crystal clarity, when Doc Wind had imparted to Wayne Morgan the information that Cady had once served a prison term for forgery.

Their big mistake—their one mistake—had been in not knowing Dan Borders was alive when they put their diabolical plan

into operation. Even then, final victory would have been theirs if the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had not snaked young Borders from the courtroom and a hangrope.

As the Robin Hood rider and Blue Hawk rode recklessly toward Tomahawk Canyon, the masked man vowed grimly that if Dura's crew succeeded in killing Dan Borders and Sue Worth that he would wreak swift and merciless vengeance. But that, at best, would be an empty victory. He would have lost his fight against evil and injustice.

He spoke softly in Midnight's silken ear, and the great stallion lengthened his stride until he seemed almost to fly over the rough terrain. Blue Hawk's gray, smaller than the stallion, but wiry and long-legged, was almost as fast.

They crossed meadows that were slashed by ravines and pitted with grass-covered pot-holes. They drove recklessly through strips of timber and thickets that were studded with daggerlike thorns. Half a mile below Tomahawk Canyon they came to Williwaw Creek again and followed its winding course.

Although it was midafternoon, clouds had slid a dark curtain over the sun and a clammy gray mist still curled up from the creek. It was like riding through a ghost world, with the hoofs of their horses striking solid sounds from the rocky earth.

Still there had been no sign of Dura and his men, no sign of Sue Worth. Had she discovered Dura and the others on her backtrail and led them astray?

The masked man allowed himself that one slim hope.

"Tomahawk Canyon's just ahead, Hawk," the Masked Rider called. "Look sharp!"

The Yaqui nodded, his obsidian eyes aglow in the ropes of mist that curled about him.

A grumbling roar came to their ears—the torrent of white water plunging through the rock-fanged entrance to Tomahawk Canyon. They passed on, hugging the edge of the stream.

Suddenly towering black cliffs reared directly before them. And slashing directly through these cliffs was the narrow mouth of the canyon through which the creek roared and tumbled. Inside the canyon mouth mist curled thicker and thicker, churned by a chill wind that funneled through the narrow cleft like the spasmodic breathing of a giant in nightmarish sleep.

The Masked Rider lifted a hand, and they halted, while the mystery rider studied the dripping black cliffs warily. The water rushed and pounded against the huge boulders with a sound like the continuous roll of giant drums, while from somewhere among the weird rock formations came a sound like vast pipe-organ music.

Extending into the pass, on their side of the stream, was a narrow rock ledge, wet and slippery, between the rushing water and the sheer wall.

"Yuh hear anything, Hawk?" the Masked Rider asked suddenly.

Before the Yaqui could answer, the sound came to them again—dim as a far whisper, but unmistakable above the rumble of the water—a burst of gunfire, coming from inside the canyon!

"Gunshots, Senor!" the Yaqui exclaimed. "It would seem that we are too late!"

"Not yet!" The Masked Rider was like a whiplash. "Mebbe there's still time. Come on, Hawk!"

And he drove the mighty stallion straight into the weird, mist-filled canyon mouth.

THE stallion's hoofs struck sparks from the flinty earth as he carried the Robin Hood rider onto that narrow, slippery ledge between the sheer wall and the rushing water. Blue Hawk followed without hesitation on the agile gray.

As they entered the maw of Tomahawk Canyon, purple half-shadows closed like a shroud about them. Smashing sound beat back from the cliffs. Gray coils of mist rose from the churning water and seemed to curl about them like ghostly arms. They could hear nothing now but the brawling voice of the stream.

Both Midnight and the gray went with the swift agility of a mountain goat along the ledge. Once the gray slipped, its hoofs pawing wildly at the wet rock for a hold, miraculously escaping a tumble into the raging, boulder-filled water.

The passage widened slowly, becoming a canyon that was perhaps a hundred

yards in width, and they were able to move away from the stream. The mist thinned, but still spread like a transparent gray blanket over Tomahawk Canyon. The roar of the stream dimmed.

Scrub timber studded the canyon floor, their gnarled limbs outflung like old men begging in the mist. Daggerlike rock spires and grotesquely shaped boulders loomed dimly. It was a weird, sinister-looking place, made all the more so by the roaring pound of guns somewhere ahead of them.

The Masked Rider jerked the stallion to a halt, trying to pierce the soupy stuff with his eyes, trying to locate the source of the gunshots.

It was obvious that a savage gun battle was in progress.

"Over there, Senor, to our left," Blue Hawk said, pointing.

The masked man nodded. "We may be in time, after all. Dan Borders must be puttin' up a whale of a fight!"

They went forward again, more slowly. The gunfire, already startlingly close, grew louder.

"Close in—close in!" they heard Ben Dura's voice yell out of the mist. "We'll rush 'em. We'll finish the sheriff along with Borders and the girl!"

The Masked Rider lifted his hand again for a halt. The blasting guns were no more that fifty yards ahead of them now. They could see gouts of orange flame blossoming through the mist. They could see dim figures moving among huge boulders that lined the base of the broken, sloping canyon wall on this side.

And, leaping out from a shadowy aperture at the base of the wall, they could see other darting red tongues of flame.

"Sheriff Jacks got here first," the mystery rider said in a low tone. "And now Dura's killer crew has got the sheriff, Borders and the girl bottled-up inside that cave. Seems to be two guns firin' inside the cave."

"Which is not enough, Senor."

"No! Dura's hellions are convergin' on the cave, and they can creep right up to within a few feet of its mouth, and those inside won't have a chance!"

"Sheriff—Borders!" they heard Dura call. "We got yuh cornered like badgers in a hole. Throw down yore guns and come out and we'll treat yuh right!"

"You go to blazes, Dura!" There was outrage in the sheriff's bellowing voice. "It took me a long time to get through my thick skull what killin' skunks you and Stone Cady are, but now I know! Come and get us if yuh want us!"

"We'll do just that!" Dura snarled. "All right, you buskies. Don't leave nobody alive!"

Volcanic gunfire erupted, the muzzle flashes stabbing like red lightning through the mist. Lead screamed. Above the tumult sounded Dura's voice, goading his men on.

The Masked Rider could pick out individual figures in the shifting mist, he could see their hard, wolfish faces. There were Dura and Al Caspin, and the enormous bulk of Stone Cady, and Clay Rand's thin figure wriggling snakelike among the boulders. And two others—a blocky rider named "Hachita" and a lanky hombre with off-color eyes called "Chalk-Eye."

The attackers were on the move. Keeping to the cover of the boulders, they drew closer and closer to the cave mouth, firing as they went. They were only a few scant feet from the opening now.

"I'm givin' yuh one last chance to surrender!" Dura called out.

"We ain't fallin' for yore skunky lies, Dura," Dan Borders' clear voice answered. "Come a-smokin'!"

"Send the girl out, then—we don't crave to hurt her."

"I'll stay here!" Sue said quickly, defiantly. "I won't come out!"

DURA cursed, the sound like the snapping snarl of an enraged wolf.

"Get ready to jump into that cave, you gunnies!" he cried. "Kill till there ain't nobody to kill!"

There was a stir among the crouched killers.

"Ready, Hawk?" the Masked Rider asked softly.

"Si, Senor—ready!"

The great stallion shot forward suddenly with a rushing thunder of hoofs, driving straight at the killer pack, followed closely by Blue Hawk on the gray. Twin black Colts were in the masked man's hands, blazing, roaring out their deadly requiem.

The Anvil killers whirled, staring slack-jawed as that grim, weird figure in black

hurtled out of the coiling mist toward them. He rode as if he were a part of the great, fiery-eyed stallion, black cape billowing in the wind that whined through Tomahawk Canyon.

Stone Cady's whining cry rose shrill.

"It's the Masked Rider and his Indian pard. Kill 'em—kill 'em!"

The killer crew, caught between two fires, were flushed into the open. Confusion gripped them as they leaped to their feet. They started firing raggedly.

Inside the cave Dan Borders' voice lifted exultantly.

"The Masked Rider's sidin' us now, Sheriff! Let the snakes have it!"

The masked man's six-gun thunder rolled out over the canyon, intermingled with the crashing echoes of Blue Hawk's carbine.

CHAPTER XV

Guns in the Fog

AT A word from his rider, the mighty stallion swept past the Anvil outlaws, and at a pressure of the Masked Rider's knees, whirled, reared, pawing the air. He danced his weird jig, ears flattened, an awesome sight there in the mist.

Then, as the Masked Rider spoke softly in his ear, Midnight hurtled forward again like a Juggernaut of doom. Behind the mask the black-garbed rider's eyes gleamed with an implacable iciness. His guns kicked and blazed.

The blocky Hachita went down, arms outflung as if hugging the earth. And Stone Cady ran three ponderous steps, and fell, terror washing over his fat face. He wasn't dead. He rolled and wallowed over the ground like an enormous hog as he tried to gain the shelter of a boulder.

Dan Borders and the sheriff stood in the cave mouth, firing methodically. Blood was running down Dan's face.

A bullet plucked at the Masked Rider's sleeve. Another scorched a groove across his throat. He held his fire, staring through fogging gunsmoke and mist, trying to locate Dura.

Al Caspin ran out from behind a boulder, gun in hand. He stopped, his gun coming up.

"I'm tallyin' yuh, Masked Rider!" he cried in a sadistically wicked voice. "I'll watch yuh wallow in yore own blood. Take it!"

And then, even as he squeezed the trigger, the waspy killer jerked convulsively. He turned his head, staring with a shocked surprise at the lithe figure of Blue Hawk, at the smoking rifle in the Yaqui's coppery hands.

"You cussed Injun!" he snarled, and tried to bring his gun muzzle about, but instead turned loose of the gun and fell forward on his face and lay still.

Clay Rand was calling somewhere, a greater and greater terror thinning his voice:

"Ben—Ben! Let's get out of this! That masked devil'll kill us all!"

The Masked Rider had located Dura now. Dura, deserting his men, had wheeled and was running along the base of the canyon wall. He was darting glances upward, obviously looking for a way out of the death-filled canyon.

The masked man leaped from saddle. He plunged after Dura, dodging among the boulders, momentarily losing sight of the Anvil foreman. When he saw Dura again, Dura had stopped, was clawing frantically up the broken canyon wall.

When the Masked Rider reached the spot Dura was twenty feet above the canyon floor. He was scrambling frantically along a slash in the wall that looked like a natural flume.

"All right, Dura, this is trail's end!" the masked man called flatly.

Dura stopped, half-turned, flinging a bitter, hate-filled look at the black-garbed rider.

"Blast yuh, Masked Rider!" he snarled. "Yuh've cheated me out of an empire. But yuh won't live to tell about it!"

He jerked up his gun and pulled the trigger. A series of empty clicks was the only sound.

Dura stared dazedly at the empty weapon. Then he cursed savagely, flung the useless gun at the Masked Rider, whirled and started clambering up the crude flume again toward the canyon rim two hundred feet above.

The masked man lifted his own gun, then lowered it. He couldn't shoot an unarmed man in the back, not even a hu-

man snake like Dura

He holstered the gun with a quick movement, caught hold of a protruding slab of rock and jerked himself upward. With amazing speed and agility he propelled himself upward along the flume, using hands and spurred boots to cling to the crumbly, treacherous rock surface. Gradually the distance between him and Ben Dura lessened.

Now they were fifty feet from the canyon floor, now seventy. . . . Loose rocks clattered downward to bring up with a crash against boulders at the foot of the flume. The Masked Rider could see Dura's clawing feet not ten feet above him.

"Pull up, Dura!" he called ringingly. "I don't want to kill yuh!"

Again the dark killer flung that bitter glance over his shoulder, and saw that doomlike, black-garbed figure only a few feet below him. He stopped, twisted about, bracing his feet. Snarling like a cornered cougar, he grabbed up a head-sized rock, flung it point-blank at the masked man's head.

THE Masked Rider ducked, feeling the wind of the missile an inch from his head. Bracing his powerful legs, he drove himself upward in a desperate, headlong thrust.

His fingers clutched one of Dura's boots. Dura kicked savagely at the Masked Rider's head with the other foot. The kick landed, and vari-colored pinwheels gyrated inside the masked avenger's skull.

But he hung on doggedly, and jerked with all his might. With a yell of alarm, Dura lost his balance and thudded against the rock. The masked man drove in at him, smashing a fist at Dura's jaw.

The blow missed and Dura, falling sideward, clutched at his adversary. They slid along the flume, clawing, mauling, gouging. They crashed against an upthrust slag of rock. The rotten slag broke loose, and they plunged sickeningly downward, gathering speed with each yard they traveled.

A small avalanche of rock and shale gathered and started rumbling and crashing with them toward the fanglike boulders that lay at the base of the wall.

The Masked Rider fought desperately to break loose from Dura. He dug in his spurs and clawed wildly at protruding rock fragments. Faster and faster.

Then his fingers touched a daggerlike strip of granite, curled like steel cables about it. His arm was almost torn from its socket as his downward plunge was abruptly checked.

The sudden stop tore Dura's clutching arms loose from him. The Anvil killer plunged on down the flume, faster and faster, half-buried in shale, tumbling over and over. The Masked Rider glimpsed the man's blanched face, heard his high thin scream of terror above the rumble of the avalanche.

Then the mass, with Dura in its center, slammed with a final, sickening crash against the jagged boulders at the base of the walls. Powderlike dust fogged upward.

Bruised and shaken, the Masked Rider slowly pulled himself to a place of safety, then started lowering himself slowly down the flume. Dura lay almost buried under the pile of rock and shale. He was not moving, and would never move again.

Half-sickened, the man in black turned away, aware for the first time that the firing had stopped. He heard voices among the boulders in front of the cave and walked in that direction. He met Blue Hawk, running toward him, anxiety stamped on his coppery face.

"Are you all right, Senor?" the Yaqui asked, staring at the blood showing beneath the mask.

"All right, Hawk. Just a few scratches. Dura is dead. How about the others?"

"Three are dead—Caspin, Clay Rand and the one called Hachita. Cady is wounded, and frightened. The other one, Chalk-Eye, has surrendered and is tied up. The fight is over."

"And won," the Masked Rider murmured with satisfaction.

Stone Cady lay on the ground and stared up at Sheriff Jacks, Dan Borders and Sue Worth. Blood stained his shirt from a shoulder wound. A man who had turned yellow as certain defeat stared him in the face, his fat-embedded eyes were wide with fear.

Sue Worth leaned against a boulder, her eyes studiously avoiding the still figures of her dead stepfather and the others.

Cady's wide-eyed gaze shifted to the Masked Rider as the avenger and Blue Hawk came up. In the Robin Hood rider's

cold eyes he saw no glimmer of mercy or pity.

"This wasn't my idea, Masked Rider," he babbled. "Dura made me come along."

"Cady," the masked man said contemptuously, "yuh're a yellow hound! And yuh'll hang, the same as Dura would if he was alive!"

The fat undertaker raised himself on an elbow. "I—the law can't hang me," he whined. "I've killed nobody."

"How about Cash Borders, and Jericho Jenkins?"

"I had nothin' to do with either of them killin's, and I can prove it!" Cady said wildly. "Dura had Al Caspin and Hachita over there lock Borders inside the line cabin and set it afire. He figgered to steal the Anvil. Dura himself killed Jericho Jenkins and tossed the body into the corral with the stud, because he was afraid Jericho had seen the cabin door was nailed up. All I done was—"

"Forge the fake will Dura meant to use to steal the Anvil," the Masked Rider said grimly, as Cady paused. "Which is plenty to put yuh back behind bars where yuh belong."

CADY sank back to the ground, an utterly defeated man.

"Yeah, I forged the deed," he whimpered. "Dura promised me a cut. But I won't hang. I hope Ben Dura roasts in purgatory! He went crazy wild when he found Dan Borders wasn't dead and had come back."

"Which just about winds up the case, I reckon." The Masked Rider turned to Sheriff Jacks. "Sheriff, is Wayne Morgan still in Dutch with the law!"

"He shore ain't!" Jacks declared emphatically. "Never was, in fact. I just let my temper get the best of my judgment. Nor you ain't either, Masked Rider, so far as I'm concerned. Was a time, I admit, when I'd have jumped at the chance to put a bullet through yore brisket. But I see now yuh were workin' on the side of law and order all the time. If yuh ever run across this Morgan, tell him I'm plumb sorry for bein' such a jughead!"

"I'll do that," the man in black promised solemnly. "Reckon he's a long way from here by now, but our trails'll likely cross ag'in sometime."

"*Bueno!*" Sheriff Jacks stared heavily about at the grisly results of the savage battle. "Bein' sheriff is an awful messy job sometimes. This is the part I don't like."

He trudged over and stood looking down at the dead men. Clay Rand he pulled behind a boulder, out of consideration for the girl. He turned to look at her furtively.

Sue Worth, however, was paying no attention to him nor anybody else except Dan Borders. The two stood close together, their arms about each other, looking into each other's eyes. As the sheriff watched, their lips met in a long kiss.

The lawman blinked owlishly, then grinned.

"Masked Rider, with Clay Rand out of the way and the Anvil belongin' to Dan Borders, them two kids are goin' to be powerful happy. I aim to ask 'em to name the first one. . . . Now what in blazin' tarnation?"

The sheriff stared, his heavy face a pattern of ludicrous surprise. The masked man and his Yaqui saddlemate had vanished. . . .

At that moment the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk were entering the narrow, mist-filled pass that would let them out of Tomahawk Canyon into Silvertip Basin. Beyond lay the broad, fertile land they loved so well.

"We leave Silvertip Basin now, Senor?" the Yaqui asked softly.

"This job is finished." The Masked Rider nodded. "We'll go over the next hill, the next mountain, across the next river. Always there are men and women who need our help against the dark forces of evil and tyranny that would destroy 'em, just like we were needed here. Would yuh have it any different?"

"No, Senor. Until we die we shall fight the wicked, aid the honest and oppressed."

Two ghostlike, mysterious figures, they rode on into the pass—twin symbols of justice, freedom and courage, their ears attuned always to the voices of troubled men calling across the vast new land.

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Next Issue's Novel: TREASURE IN LEATHER, by Walker A. Tompkins

INJUN HATE

Deep into dangerous, hostile country rides a cavalry unit led by men who cannot forget their personal enmity in the interest of a common cause!

a frontier novelet

CHAPTER I

Winter Battle

IT WAS past noon that winter day when "Cheyenne Jim" Carroll, Citizen Scout, entered the canteen at Fort Wallace.

Outside, the sun was shining brightly. There had been snow during the night, but now the snow had stopped its fall and the temperature was falling instead.

Cheyenne Jim closed the door of the canteen and stood before it to unwrap a long woolen muffler that had covered his throat and the lower part of his face. That done, he strolled to the end of the bar.

He was a tall, slender twenty-eight. His eyes were keen, and his manner that of a man beyond his years. That was because of what he had passed through already in the thing called Life.

He had been born in a sod house on the Kansas prairie. His pioneer parents had been killed during an Indian raid. Jim had been captured by hostile Cheyennes and had lived three years in their villages.

But the white blood called, and at sixteen he made his escape, to stumble into a trappers' camp. Since then, to make his living, he had hunted and trapped and served as a guide. He knew Indian lore and Indian ways, and sold his knowledge.

The war between the States came. To Cheyenne Jim, it was nothing more than a distant rumble. There was no call for recruits where he was living.

After the war ended, railroad building commenced, settlers poured into the prairie country, Indians went on a rampage because their hunting grounds were being ruined. And General Phil Sheridan was sent to head the Army's Department of the Missouri, with headquarters at Hays

The Cheyennes charged again, trying to overwhelm the soldiers by the fury of their attack

by

JOHNSTON McCULLEY

City, and conduct his campaign to compel the Indians to keep to reservations.

Jim Carroll found his real job then. Part of Sheridan's troops were seasoned veterans and part raw recruits. Only a few of his officers knew the Indian country, and much less the Indian and his wiles. So Sheridan formed a body to be known as Citizen Scouts. Cheyenne Jim was one of the first men to take service with the new outfit.

It was a strange outfit. The Citizen Scouts were not subjected to army discipline. They did not drill and stand guard or do any of the duties of regular enlisted men.

BUT when a detachment or large column was sent into Indian country, the scouts went in advance or with the troops, their duty being to gather information for officers, give advice as to the country, and suggest camp sites that could be defended well and guarded easily.

Between the Citizen Scouts and cavalrymen, termed "yellow-legs" because of the stripes down the seams of their breeches, there was continual strife. It dwindled almost to nothing on the trail or in action, but was strong in fixed posts, especially during the winter.

Men penned together by winter weather were compelled to see too much of one

another and got on on another's nerves. In snowed-in mining camps, the disease that follows is called "cabin fever." Army officers called it "winter fever."

During this winter of 1868, the fever was unusually strong at Fort Wallace. Gray-haired Captain Gregg did his best to combat it by keeping his officers and men busy and giving them new interests when he could.

Apart from hunters and trappers who took winter refuge there, the few merchants and Citizen Scouts were not under army command except in extreme cases. However, whenever it was possible, the troopers were ordered to keep the peace, and the little post jail would be filled with men sentenced to spend a couple of days there and cool off.

Cheyenne Jim had served two such days once for fighting, and he was thinking of that now as he entered the canteen. For that, he could thank Lieutenant Richard Blaney, a boyish shavetail who had arrived recently from West Point. Blaney had ordered his squad of troopers to jail Cheyenne Jim.

The disgrace had been greatest because Jim was engaged to Faith Beals, the pretty daughter of grizzled Sergeant Beals, senior non-commissioned officer of the post. Jim had just come from the Beals cabin, where he finally had persuaded Faith to look at him again, though still with a scowl on her pretty face.

As he reached the end of the bar now, Cheyenne Jim glanced over the room while waiting for bottle and glass. The same low-ceilinged room with beamed roof and smoke-darkened rafters! The same odors of stale whisky and tobacco fumes. And the same faces!

There was "Pappy" Lewis, an old hunter who lived in Fort Wallace now and did odd jobs; and Hank Mannox, chief of a surveying crew for the Kansas Pacific Railway, waiting for a chance to get to Sheridan City when he could go under Army escort. A few cavalrymen off duty were scattered around. A couple of sutlers, a buyer of buffalo robes—and Pete Simpson!

Simpson was a few years older than Cheyenne Jim, had been with a band of guerrillas during the war, and there were ugly rumors about his service. But he knew the Indian country, and had been accepted as a member of the Citizen Scouts.

There had been bad blood between Jim Carroll and Pete Simpson even before the formation of the Scouts. Their enmity had increased when both had become interested in Faith Beals. Since she had shown her preference for Jim, Simpson had become his avowed enemy.

Cheyenne Jim turned his back on the room, feeling the sickness of winter fever coming upon him. He told himself he hated the place. Most of all he hated Lieutenant Blaney and Pete Simpson. Now he heard Simpson's sarcastic voice:

"Wonder how it feels to be a jailbird?"

Cheyenne Jim almost choked on his drink. But with remembrance of what his last fight had got him, he resisted an impulse to spring across the room and be at Pete Simpson's throat.

SIMPSON went on taunting: "After that little taste of discipline, Jim'll be turnin' yellowleg next and obeyin' orders of such young squirts as Lieutenant Blaney."

Cheyenne Jim whirled to face him. "That's enough, Simpson," he warned. "You know what I think of that West Point shavetail."

His eyes blazing, Simpson got to his feet. "And who are you, Cheyenne Jim, to be tellin' me what's enough?" he demanded. "You're ready to run at beck and call of any yellowleg since Sergeant Beals' daughter has smiled at you a couple of times."

Simpson took a few steps toward Cheyenne Jim. The older man, by a few years, was short, thick in body, and his eyes were ablaze. Winter fever had claimed a couple of more victims, the other men in the room thought.

Everyone in the place was on his feet, bending forward, waiting for the clash. Neither Cheyenne Jim nor Simpson was wearing a gun, but they both had long knives in their belts.

"Outside, boys, outside!" the man behind the bar was begging. "Don't mess up the canteen."

Before the men could come together, the front door was jerked open, and Sergeant Beals strode in, his manner stiff and soldiery.

"Ten-*shun!*" he barked.

The troopers in the canteen stiffened. Sergeant Beals stepped aside, and into the canteen marched Second Lieutenant Richard Blaney, the youngster newly come from West Point.

Blaney looked boyish. His face was pink from the cold, and his eyes were bright. His entrance had stopped the fight. The lieutenant took in the scene quickly.

"No fighting, you men!" he snapped. "You Citizen Scouts must learn to behave yourselves. Carroll! Want to spend two more days in jail?"

Cheyenne Jim's eyes blazed anew as he looked at the young lieutenant.

"Tryin' to act like a big man?" he asked with a sneer. "Fresh from an army college! Officer and gentleman—"

"I try to be both, Carroll," Blaney interrupted.

"You can throw around a lot of authority with them shoulder straps on. I ain't a yellowleg to be bossed by you. I'd be willin' to spend more days in jail for smashin' your pretty face but it'd be a pity and shame to pick on a little boy."

"So?" Blaney's eyes were blazing now. "Carroll, we were taught a lot of things at the Point. Among them boxing and keeping our tempers in a situation like this. But I'm willing to do one thing. I'll take off my blouse, Carroll, and we'll step out back and have it out, man-to-man. No rank about me, Carroll, and nothing but my fists to prove that maybe I'm not the raw boy you seem to think me."

"I'm agreeable," Cheyenne Jim Carroll answered. His eyes were agleam now. "Everybody heard the lieutenant's remarks, I reckon. It's man to man, without rank. You can tell Captain Gregg that after I smash this pup and he has me put under military arrest for hittin' an officer. For that's about what he'll do."

"Outside, you scoundrel!" Blaney shouted. He was getting out of his overcoat and coat.

Somebody threw open the rear door of the canteen, and everybody went outside where the wind had swept the ground almost free of snow. Sergeant Beals stalked behind the others sternly, his face a mask. His officer had spoken, and Beals was soldier enough to keep out of this.

Cheyenne Jim tossed aside his coonskin cap and got out of his buckskin coat. He whirled and charged, fists coming up. The lieutenant was waiting with his arms at his sides, not even putting up a guard. This would take less than half a minute, Jim judged.

Blaney sidestepped neatly at the proper moment, and one of his fists after the other thudded into Jim's face. Jim bored in, brute strength against fistic science. He knew frontier brands of fighting, but nothing about what he thought were fancy brands.

HATE surged through him. This was the man who had caused him to be called a jailbird! He would punish this man as no other ever had been punished with fists at Fort Wallace!

He stood face to face with Blaney to slug it out. Some of his blows got home. But more of Blaney's reached the target. It seemed to Cheyenne Jim that Blaney was always in two places, that he had a dozen fists.

One of Jim's eyes was puffed already. His face was a smear of blood. His breath was commencing to come in painful gasps. The men who watched looked at one another with bewilderment.

Then, Blaney took the aggressive. He bored in also. Jim was forced to retreat step by step, to try to cover up and dodge those snappy blows that had rocked his head so often.

Blaney slipped on a patch of snow, reeled aside and fell. With a wild whoop, Cheyenne Jim was upon him. He prepared to use a boot on Blaney's face. But at the last fraction of a second, the lieutenant twisted aside and dodged the blow. Then his hand went out to seize one of Jim's ankles and tumble him to the frozen ground.

The lieutenant was on his feet instantly, bending forward.

"Get up!" he ordered. "Gentlemen don't use their boots on a fallen foe. Get up and take your medicine for trying it."

Cheyenne Jim lurched to his feet and rushed forward. Once more hard fists met him and drove him back. Blaney battered him until Jim sank to his knees, bent forward and tried to cover his head with his hands. The lieutenant stepped back.

"That's enough," he said. "You've learned your lesson, I hope. We'll shake hands now."

Cheyenne Jim's battered face seemed to freeze as he tried to stand erect.

"I don't shake hands with you!" he said.

"Very well, Carroll. Sergeant Beals!"

"Sir?"

"Hand me my coat and overcoat, please."

As the sergeant got the garments, Blaney cupped snow in his hands and with it washed the blood from his face. He put on the garments—and was an officer again.

"Now, sergeant, we'll do what we came here to do—make the usual inspection and check of the canteen."

"Very well, sir."

They went into the canteen, and most of the watchers followed them. Pete Simpson grinned at Cheyenne Jim and turned away. Jim began putting snow on his own face.

At the door, old "Pappy" Lewis whispered to Hank Mannox, the railway surveyor:

"Did you see Jim as he looked at the lieutenant and refused to shake hands? Know what you saw in Jim's face then? I know, Hank—Injun hate. The worst kind—cold, deadly hate that boils inside a man till the blow-up comes. Men like Jim and Simpson fight and forget their trouble. But when a man's got Injun hate in him, he never forgets."

CHAPTER II

Under Orders

CAPTAIN GREGG, the silvery-haired post commander, had been given the post by General Sheridan after severe illness which made it inadvisable for him to be sent into the field during the winter. He was pacing around his little office when Second Lieutenant Blaney entered and saluted. Gregg waved him to a chair.

"I sent for you, Blaney, because a courier has arrived with news from Sheridan City, the boom town on the new railroad," Gregg told his junior officer. "As you may know, Colonel Forsyth left Sheridan City some time ago to drive toward hostile Cheyenne and Sioux known to be on the Arickadee branch of the Republican river."

"Yes, sir."

"We know now that several small bands of Cheyennes and Sioux, young braves, slipped away from the main body of Indians and are wandering around the country between here and Sheridan City, committing depredations."

Blaney straightened in his chair.

Captain Gregg went on, "That makes travel between Sheridan City and this post hazardous without heavy military escort, which we cannot spare at this time. A demonstration against one or more of these small bands of hostiles should be enough."

"Yes, sir."

"You're fresh from the Point, Blaney, where your record was admirable, but you need field experience. You must apply to the field what you learned in books. I have no experienced officer to send with you. With a small detachment, you will start at dawn and go to Sheridan City, attending to any group of hostiles you encounter. Your return to this post will be subject to events and my orders."

"Thank you, sir!"

"Take pack mules, not wagons, and you'll make better time and need less men. I'll send Sergeant Beals with you; he is an old trooper and will be invaluable. Pick ten men, and take a couple of Citizen Scouts. I suggest Cheyenne Jim Carroll and Pete Simpson, who are now here at the post."

Blaney's face reddened. "May I say something off the record, sir?"

"Speak up, Dick," Gregg said, his manner fatherly.

"Regarding the Citizen Scouts, sir—Carroll and Simpson are at loggerheads. My entrance in the canteen a short time ago prevented a fight between them."

"Winter fever," Gregg suggested.

"I doubt whether they'll work effectively together."

"It is your duty as an officer to see that they do."

"Yes, sir. There's another thing—animosity between Carroll and myself."

Captain Gregg's eyes twinkled. "I've heard already about what happened at the canteen. You acquitted yourself beautifully, I understand. Just watch Carroll, that's all that is necessary. Winter fever again—and the fact you had him jailed for

disorderly conduct. I'll speak to Carroll. Now, Lieutenant Blaney, I'll have the troop called together so you can pick your men. That's all."

Blaney left to hurry to his quarters. A moment later, orderlies were scurrying around, and the crisp air carried throughout the post the shrill bugle call "Boots and Saddles!"

Cheyenne Jim was at the Beals' cabin trying to talk to Faith Beals when the call came. Since he was a Citizen Scout and not a yellowleg, it did not concern him. But he did say:

"That call's funny. Not the usual thing for the yellowlegs to have mounted drill on a day like this."

"A courier came into the post not long ago," Faith told him. "Maybe they're going to send out the troop. You failed to notice the courier. You were too busy fighting."

"Now, Faith!"

SHE WAS at the stove making cookies. She turned to face him.

"Go away, Jim," she ordered. "I don't want anything more to do with you until you can be a man and behave yourself."

"I hate that brat of a shavetail!"

"You won't try to understand army life and ways. Why do you scorn officers and men who must have discipline? Remember, Jim, my father is a yellowleg—and an old trooper."

"Faith—"

"Leave me, Jim. And don't come back until you're more of a man."

"I'll charge this up to the baby lieutenant, too," he threatened.

"Father's coming," she said.

Beals entered the cabin a moment later and frowned when he saw Cheyenne Jim.

"Jim, keep away from Faith," he ordered. "And don't look on me as your friend any more until you can act a man's part!"

"Somethin' else to be charged up against Blaney," Jim grumbled.

"I wouldn't charge up too much against him," Beals warned. "He might pay off like he did today. Captain Gregg wants to see you—has an orderly searchin' for you. We're goin' out at dawn, small detachment. We'll head for Sheridan City. Small bands of hostiles around there."

"I'm to go?" Jim asked.

"I think so. You'd better hurry. Keep old Captain Gregg waitin' and he'll give you worse than Blaney did, but in a different way."

Jim's rage rose. But after a swift glance at Faith he hurried from the Beals' cabin, wrapping his muffler around his throat.

He had to wait a few minutes before the busy Captain Gregg could see him. Finally, an orderly ushered him into the commandant's office.

"Sit down, Carroll," Captain Gregg ordered. "I'm sending a small detachment to Sheridan City. Lieutenant Blaney will be in command. I want two Citizen Scouts to go. You're one."

"Yes, sir," Cheyenne Jim replied, humbly.

"The other scout will be Pete Simpson."

Jim's eyes glittered and his lower jaw clamped into place as if to prevent words rumbling from his throat.

"I've heard you and Simpson have a case of winter fever on each other. That's nothing unusual, and you may have personal differences. If so, you'll both put them aside while on this duty. That's an order!"

"Yes, sir."

"Both you and Simpson will give Lieutenant Blaney the best service of which you are capable. Understand that! Blaney is a young officer, but had a splendid record at the Point. I'm sure he will distinguish himself in the field."

Cheyenne Jim could not trust himself to speak.

"I've heard about the fight you had with the lieutenant. If I hadn't heard, your face would assure me there had been one. Don't always judge a man's fighting qualities by his appearance and manner, Carroll—nor by his youth. The detachment will start at dawn. Prepare yourself. Draw on the commissary for what you need, and I'll honor your requisition. That's all, Citizen Scout Carroll. Dismissed!"

As he left the captain's office, Cheyenne Jim was still trembling with rage.

Fifteen were in the party—Lieutenant Blaney, Sergeant Beals, ten troopers, Cheyenne Jim and Pete Simpson as scouts, and Hank Mannox, the railroad surveyor, who had been at Fort Wallace to go to Sheridan City when he could do

so under military escort.

The pack mules had been loaded and were being herded by two old troopers. Everything was ready for the start at dawn. Almost everybody at the post had gathered at the side of the small parade ground even at that early hour.

CHEYENNE JIM had dressed for the journey, stuffed his saddle-bags and looked to his weapons. He carried a saddle gun, an army pistol and his long keen knife. He was dressed in buckskin with thick woolen underclothing, with his throat muffled well, thick mittens on his hands, ears tabs on his coonskin cap, woolen leggings beneath his buckskin ones, and thick woolen socks inside his moccasins. A canteen filled with a mixture of water and brandy hung from the pommel of his saddle.

Pete Simpson was dressed in similar fashion. Both Scouts were mounted on tough ponies. Without speaking to each other, they rode to their position on the right of the detachment as the other men swung themselves into their saddles.

Jim's face was a mass of bruises, there was a cut under one eye and the other was blackened. But he had recovered full strength after his fight with Lieutenant Blaney. The bruised face did not bother him much, except in pride—he had had a bruised face plenty of times before.

Hank Mannox rode a powerful sorrel and was dressed properly for the trail. Riding across country was nothing new for him. He and his crew of surveyors had gone into the wilderness for weeks at a time, staking a path for a new railway.

Captain Gregg, with Blaney beside him, rode to the detachment, the captain giving Blaney last-minute instructions. Sergeant Beals called the men to attention as the officers approached. Gregg wheeled his mount aside, and Blaney went to his proper position in front of his men.

" 'Tention!" he barked. "Men, you have been told our mission, and Sergeant Beals has given you instructions. Mr. Mannox, please ride between the detachment and the pack mules. Cheyenne Jim and Pete Simpson! You are Citizen Scouts out on duty, so act accordingly. Put your personal feelings aside. Your first duty is to this detachment."

Simpson spoke from the corner of his mouth in whispers, so Jim could hear:

"The young squirt of a yellowleg! We'll have to tuck him in at night."

"Prepare to march!" Blaney's voice rang. "Scouts out!"

Jim and Simpson wheeled their ponies and loped to the gate of the fort. Behind the scouts, Blaney started the detachment. Jim noticed that Faith was not with the other persons at the side of the parade ground to wave at the men.

The sun came up in a clear sky. The wind was cold but abating, and the feel of snow was in the air again. Jim rode ahead and to the right of the detachment and Simpson on the left, putting some distance between themselves and the others.

They made a noon stop, then went on. It would be easy going this day and the next, then they would be in rougher country where the ravines would be choked with caked snow and sleet. For at least two days there should be no danger of encountering hostile Cheyennes and Sioux.

Jim and Simpson had picked the camp site for the first night, one generally used by detachments. There was good shelter beneath an overhanging bluff beside a creek, plenty of wood and water. Before the detachment came up, the Scouts had broken the ice in the creek so water could be obtained.

"I'm sick of takin' orders from that baby officer," Simpson said to Jim. "Some day, I'll cuss him out. He can't do any more than discharge us from the Scouts. Can't give us reg'lar military punishment, accordin' to the deal."

Jim did not reply. He hacked at the ice of the creek with his hatchet.

"There's good money to be made along the new railroad," Simpson hinted. "Runnin' firewater and guns to Injuns is one way."

"You'd do a thing like that?" Jim asked. "Know what it'd mean? Raids, massacres—"

"Who gives a cuss? The country belongs to the Injuns by rights. They don't want railroads and settlers. You should know how they feel, Cheyenne. You lived in their lodges when you were a youngster."

"Yep, and got back to my own kind quick as I could," Jim reminded him. "I'm

white, and not a renegade."

"You aimin' to call me a renegade?" Simpson asked, angrily.

"You talk like one," Jim replied. "But I reckon you're only makin' noise."

"Tryin' to sound me out?" Simpson asked. "Tell you more later. The men are comin' in. But I—I'm in touch with certain parties, both Sioux and Cheyennes. Maybe I know what's behind these little raids by small war parties."

THE detachment rode in and the men busied themselves preparing the camp for the night. They collected wood and built fires, watered stock, unloaded the pack mules, broke out provisions and began preparing a meal. Horses and pack mules were fed and watered, then hobbled and turned loose. By dusk, the sky was cloudy.

Just after dusk, one of the guards brought in two young Indians. Lieutenant Blaney called Jim and Simpson to act as interpreters. The Indians were Cheyennes.

Simpson began questioning them before Jim could open his mouth. Then he reported to Blaney.

"They're young Cheyennes, sir. Say they're on the way to Fort Wallace to turn themselves in. Declare they left a small war party because they don't want to fight the whites. They don't seem to know anything about movements of hostiles."

"Give them food, and send them on," Blaney ordered.

Jim drew in his breath sharply. He had spent his young boyhood in Cheyenne lodges, and had known every word spoken, and there had seemed to be an understanding between the young bucks and Simpson. He glanced at the other scout sharply, but Simpson did not meet his eyes.

Blaney saw his glance.

"Carroll, got any objections to the interpretations, or any ideas of your own?" Blaney asked.

"Simpson acted as interpreter, sir."

"Think you could have done a better job, Carroll? I've heard you lived with the Cheyennes once."

Jim's bruised face flamed. "I was their captive when I was a boy," he explained, his voice shaking with rage. "After they had killed my parents. That doesn't make me love them much."

"Nothing to say, then?"

He could have said much, explained that the two young braves were spies, that when released, they would get behind the detachment, between it and Fort Wallace, and signal other Indians. And then, unless Lieutenant Blaney made the right moves, he would have a hostile force behind him and probably run into another in front and the detachment might be annihilated.

But if he told Blaney that, it would be discounted because there was trouble between him and Simpson, and Blaney would think Jim was trying to inform on his brother Scout. That was against Jim's code.

"Nothin' to say, sir," he told Blaney. He turned away to go to his own fire and eat supper.

Simpson strolled past as the fire died to a bed of embers. Most of the men in camp were asleep.

From the distance came sounds of boots squeaking on the snow as guards marched their rounds.

"Why didn't you tell the baby lieutenant what you heard and guessed, Cheyenne?" Simpson asked. "Maybe you're comin' to your senses. Workin' together, we could pile up a fortune."

"Would Blaney have listened to me, knowin' you and I are enemies? He'd have thought that I was tryin' to blacken you."

"We've been spittin' at each other, Cheyenne, but we ain't enemies. I'm willin' to make friends. You've got enough to do hatin' the lieutenant. Everybody knows you've got Injun hate for him. Listen to my plans, Cheyenne, and you'll have a chance to settle with him personal—when the fuss comes."

"What fuss?" Jim asked, guardedly.

"We'll talk tomorrow night. Here comes one of the guards." Simpson raised his voice. "Good night, Cheyenne! We'll have easy guidin' tomorrow, and then we'll be in bad country."

He walked toward his own fire, boots squeaking in the snow.

So, they would talk tomorrow night! Things would be safe tonight, then. And that hint—easy tomorrow and then they would be in bad country!

CHAPTER III

A Scout Resigns

LIGHT snow started falling as they were saddling in the morning. Cheyenne Jim found Hank Mannox beside him.

"Mornin' Carroll!" the surveyor greeted. "I didn't like the way those young Cheyennes acted last night. Did you?"

"They acted Injun fashion," Jim replied.

"So I know. That's what bothers me. I can see you hate Blaney, Jim, but think of the rest of us. If you learn anything, report to Blaney for our sake. I'll back you up. I've been around, and I'm not a tenderfoot."

"I know you're not, sir."

"I got a rumor at Fort Wallace from a passing trader. It's reported that Colonel Forsyth and his men had a fight on the Arickaree branch of the Republican. Forsyth was badly wounded, and Lieutenant Beecher, Surgeon Moores and several others killed. Forsyth had some Citizen Scouts with him."

"Some were my friends," Jim said.

"If the Indians really got the best of the fight, it'll go to their heads. News travels fast among the savages, as you know. Those two Cheyennes last night acted pretty cocky, it seemed to me."

Jim nodded in agreement.

"Keep your eyes open, Jim."

Jim nodded again, and a little later rode away with Simpson, and the detachment followed. It was warmer, in spite of spits of snow at times. They worked their way over rolling hills and, late in the afternoon, reached the district of broken hills and crooked ravines where stunted trees masked natural places for ambush.

After the noon halt, the two Scouts had increased their lead over the detachment and started some real scouting, looking for tracks and Indian sign, investigating the mouths of ravines.

Ahead was a good camp site used frequently by detachments, and they finally made for that. Dusk came as they reached it. Simpson swung in from the left, and he and Jim built a couple of small fires and broke ice to get water while waiting for the detachment to come up.

"Thought over what I said last night, Cheyenne?" Simpson asked.

"What you want me to think over?"

"It ain't a hangin' crime to desert the Scouts."

"If we desert, we do what?" Jim asked.

"We go on and make our fortunes. I ain't fool enough to tell you any more 'less I know where you stand. Watch me and follow my lead, Cheyenne."

The detachment came up, mules were unloaded and troopers cared for their mounts. Small tents were pitched in sheltered spots, fires built, meals prepared.

Sergeant Beals approached Blaney, and Jim, carrying water from the creek, was near enough to hear what was said.

"May I speak to the lieutenant?"

"What is it, sergeant?"

"A suggestion, sir. Pardon me, sir, it's not for me to tell an officer his business but you are not experienced in campaigning in this country. I suggest horses and mules should be kept closer to the camp tonight, picketed instead of hobbled and let roam."

"Anything else?"

"The scattered tents should be bunched, sir. And a guard should be stationed on that bluff to signal anybody's approach."

"Sergeant, do you expect a night attack?" There was a touch of humor in Blaney's voice.

"It's possible, sir. If Colonel Forsyth was driven back on the Arickaree and news of it has reached roving bands of Injuns, they'll think they're invincible and may jump us. If the lieutenant will pardon me for saying it, I've had a lot of experience in the Injun country—"

"If I feel any interest in your service record, sergeant, I can have it put before me and read it."

"Yes, sir."

JIM passed within a few feet with his pail of water. Beals called to him.

"I was suggestin' to the lieutenant—" Beals began.

"I overheard," Jim broke in. "I think you're right, sergeant. If the lieutenant will listen to old-timers—"

"That's enough, Carroll!" Blaney barked. "When I think I need your advice, I'll ask for it. Now, if you think I haven't laid out this camp right, point out

my faults."

Speaking rapidly, Jim said, "Hostiles could cut us off from water and wood if they hemmed us in here. A dozen Injuns on that bluff could shoot our horses and mules and pick off the men."

By light from the nearest fire, Jim could see wrath gathering in Blaney's face, and continued:

"Ask Mr. Mannox. He knows Injuns and their tricks."

"Here comes Simpson, your brother Scout," Blaney said. "We'll see what he says."

"Shucks!" Simpson said, after he had listened to the lieutenant. "Cheyenne is a mite nervous. Or maybe he just wants to back up Sergeant Beals, who's goin' to be his father-in-law, I hear. The camp's all right. There won't be trouble tonight."

"You seem sure of it, Simpson," Jim snapped at him. "Maybe you know."

"What do you mean by that, Carroll?" Blaney demanded.

Jim became a clam. He wouldn't have made that outburst against Simpson if Simpson had not taunted him.

"Well, Carroll?" Blaney asked.

"Nothin' to say, sir."

"I order you to explain your statement—at once!"

That blunt order in the voice Cheyenne Jim hated! Jim felt a surge of rage again.

"I'm not talkin'," Jim said, and did not add 'sir.'

"Then I'm putting you under arrest and will have you court-martialed."

"I think not!" Jim retorted. "You're goin' too far. I'm a Citizen Scout, not an enlisted man."

"I'm commanding this detachment, and you're a part of it. You're on duty now. I'll put you under arrest!"

"You can't do anything but dismiss me. Ask Sergeant Beals—or any of your men. They couldn't get good men for the Citizen Scouts without agreein' they would have rules of their own and not be like enlisted yellowlegs."

Blaney turned and glanced at Sergeant Beals in inquiry.

"That's right, sir," Beals said.

"Sergeant Beals," Blaney ordered. "Call a couple of men and put Jim Carroll under arrest! Shoot him if he tries to escape from camp. Maybe he knows too much about the redskins, too."

"What are you intimatin'?" Jim cried, his rage flaming. "Maybe accusin' me of bein' a renegade?"

"Beals, I gave you an order," Blaney barked.

"But, sir!" Beals protested. "Arrestin' him might get you in trouble with your superiors. They're touchy where Citizen Scouts are concerned."

"Leave Beals out of it!" Jim exploded. "I'm done! I resign from the Scouts right now!"

"Jim!" Sergeant Beals begged. "I know you've done foolish things, but you can't do that! Don't desert at a time like this."

"I'm not desertin'. I'm resignin'. We're not under fire—yet."

"Jim, if you resign, I'm done with you!" Beals declared. "That means Faith will be done with you, too."

Tossing his pail of water aside, Jim turned his back and strode away, shaking with rage, seeing red.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!" Blaney warned.

"Try to do that and I'll blast you down before you can get your gun out of leather! I've resigned. Shoot me now, and it'd be murder."

"Jim—" Beals begged again.

But Jim strode on furiously. At his camp, he kicked the fire and scattered it. Working with anger-induced swiftness, he began making up his blanketroll, filling his saddle-bags, getting ready to saddle up.

PETE SIMPSON had followed him cautiously through the dark night, and now spoke softly from the darkness a few feet away:

"You did right, Jim! You showed him up, I reckon. Maybe now you'll listen to me. Ride up to the mouth of the south draw and stop near that bunch of rocks. I'll drift up that way in a couple of hours. We've got some talkin' to do, and I reckon I can trust you to listen to me now."

Cheyenne Jim paid no attention to Simpson. He continued getting his belongings together. Despite his rage at Blaney, he wanted no part of Simpson's renegade scheme, if he really had one. So he did not stop by the rocks at the mouth of the south draw, but rode on.

The snow ceased, the clouds broke and the moon broke through at times. Jim rode with caution, leaving the regular trail

and starting to cut across country toward Sheridan City. He had decided to visit there for a time and return to Fort Wallace when things had cooled down.

WHEN daylight came, he stopped and unsaddled in a spot that suited him, hobbled his pony, rolled up in his blankets beneath a clump of brush, and slept. The march the day before, his lone travel during the night had tired him. When he opened his eyes, it was the middle of the afternoon.

He ate cold food and swilled his mixture of water and brandy. Later, he could kill game, build a fire, and have hot meat to eat. Forage for his pony was the principal thing that bothered him. But he found that on the hillside the wind had swept almost clear of snow in spots and there was soft brush at the mouths and along the sides of the ravines.

Jim mounted and started. He rode up out of a ravine to find a gradual slope before him, and decided to ascend it to the crest and have a look at the surrounding country before darkness came again.

As he neared the crest he grew cautious, dismounting and trailing his reins and going ahead afoot with rifle held ready. From behind a clump of brush against which the snow had drifted, he looked over the country before him.

There was an abrupt drop to a wide canyon. The wind was blowing toward him, and on it came to his nostrils the scent of damp wood smoke.

Cheyenne Jim was instantly alert. He judged the detachment was not yet in the vicinity. Even so, if everything was all right Blaney would not have stopped the detachment at such an early hour. He would want to cover as many miles as possible during the day.

Jim watched and listened, and finally decided from which direction the odor of burning wood had come. He saw a wisp of smoke curl up from behind a mass of tree-shrouded rocks. A little later, he saw two Indian ponies stray from behind the trees with heads bent as if they were searching for forage.

A sudden gust of wind carried voices to Jim's ears—Indian voices. Then he caught the sound of the voice of a white man who spoke rapidly.

He left his pony and made his way down the rough slope toward the unseen camp, keeping to cover. From behind a rock, he watched silently and motionless. A young Indian came from behind the trees and strode toward the wandering ponies, and another followed. Jim drew in his breath with a hiss—they were painted for war.

"That's settled," he heard the white man say in Cheyenne. "We'll join the rest. I did my part . . . led the yellowlegs toward the spot and then deserted them."

There was some Indian talk Jim could not hear well enough to understand, then the white man's voice again:

"—get the mules and horses . . . good stuff in the packs . . . better kill everybody and leave 'em to be found . . . teach 'em a lesson . . ."

The Indians Jim had seen had got their ponies and gone behind the rocky ledge again. Jim heard hoofbeats, and then, a short distance down the ravine, riders emerged.

Jim could make them out easily—eight young braves in their war paint, Cheyenne and Sioux. One of the small raiding parties that had been reported, he thought. And with them rode a white man—Pete Simpson.

The distance was too great for a sure shot. And Jim knew that if he did not kill Simpson with a first shot he would be in trouble, compelled to ride for his own life, and lose all chance to do anything for the detachment.

His hatred for Blaney was as great as ever but he was thinking of Beals and the troopers and Hank Mannox. He was a white man, and had good reason for hating the Indians, too.

As closely as he could with safety, Jim trailed Simpson and the small war party. "We'll join the others," he had heard Simpson say. That meant this small party was only a part of the force of Indians preparing to attack the detachment.

NEXT ISSUE

THE FATHER OF THE MAN

An Exciting Action Novelet

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER IV

The Warning

PARALLELING the progress of the hostiles, Cheyenne was careful to keep a ridge of low hills between himself and them. As he grew toward dusk he reached a crest from which he could look over the country for a distance.

In the far distance, he saw the detachment, a long line of horses and mules against the snow. It was headed toward the wide mouth of a ravine where there was wood and water.

If Blaney ordered his night camp inside the mouth of that ravine, he would be in a trap. Indians would creep down upon the detachment through the thick brush, stampede horses and mules, fire from behind cover, and block the mouth of the ravine with a fire through which the troopers would be unable to escape unscathed.

Veteran troopers might suggest, but could not persist, if an officer refused to listen. The men would make what preparations they could to put up a hot fight if attacked, and give silent thanks if they got through the night without trouble.

Jim kicked his pony's flanks and rode with speed. He thought he could reach the detachment without being seen by hostiles. He drove his pony to top speed. As the detachment turned in toward the mouth of the ravine, he rode madly down the last slope, shouting and waving one arm above his head wildly.

When he knew men of the detachment had seen him, he began riding in a small circle—the signal that foes were near. The old troopers would understand that. They'd tell Beals what it meant. Then, Jim stopped riding the circle and hurried on.

The detachment had stopped to await his arrival, Blaney riding out a short distance in front of the detachment. Jim slowed his jaded pony and rode on until he was within a few feet of the lieutenant as the other men rode slowly toward him to overhear what he had to report.

"It's Jim Carroll!" Blaney exploded. "Two of you men seize and guard him. He deserted—"

"Listen!" Cheyenne Jim interrupted. "Cheyennes and Sioux are all around you. They'll jump you tonight sure. You're goin' into a trap. I ran across one small party ridin' to join others."

The troopers were near now, listening and looking worried. Hank Mannox thrust his way forward.

"Better listen to the scout, lieutenant," Mannox said.

"This scout, as you call him, is a deserter who seems to know a little too much about the movements of the Indians. The other scout Simpson, ran away also—"

"I hate to say it, but Simpson was with those Injuns I saw," Jim broke in. "He's turned renegade."

"I've heard you and Simpson are enemies, so anything you say against him doesn't carry much weight with me."

"You're in command," Jim told him. "But don't make the mistake of refusin' to listen to experienced men. Ask Sergeant Beals. Captain Gregg ain't above listenin' to his advice. And General Phil Sheridan and Colonel Forsyth have asked him for it."

"Enough of your insolence! Leave the detachment!"

"You'll need every man and gun if the Injuns jump you."

Sergeant Beals, his face grave, stepped forward with some of the older troopers who had dismounted, and saluted.

"Sir," he told Blaney, "I know Cheyenne Jim and believe what he says. He's still an irresponsible young chump, but he knows this country and its Injuns. I suggest we make camp in the open and prepare for defense. We have men's lives in addition to Government property to think about."

"That'll do, Beals! I'm commanding here."

"Sir, it's military law that an officer in command of a detachment may be confined by the senior non-com, who may take command in his stead, if the officer suddenly goes insane."

"Why, you—" Blaney began.

Beals raised his voice. "Sir, as senior non-com, I judge you have lost your reason temporarily because of fatigue. I am taking command. Men, disarm Lieutenant Blaney. I'll take complete responsibility."

THERE was a short scuffle. Blaney's holster was emptied, and Beals ordered him back among the men, who remounted quickly. Beals called Jim to his side.

Speaking swiftly, Jim told all he knew. As he talked, Beals and some of the older men were looking around at the terrain. Dusk was falling. A bright moon would be up in a couple of hours if clouds did not drift over the hills and bank.

Sergeant Beals ordered camp made in the open on a little knoll at the base of which a small creek curled. Ice was broken to get water. The pack mules were unloaded and some of the packs piled for barricades. Mules and horses were put on picket lines near a fringe of brush.

Three men cut wood for fuel. Fires were built and the evening meal cooked and eaten. Guards were doubled.

Mannox, the surveyor, worked with the men, knowing what Beals wanted. Cheyenne Jim worked also. Lieutenant Blaney strolled around silently.

Darkness deepened and the camp was still. Fires were allowed to die down to beds of embers which could be scattered with a few swift kicks if necessary. Scarcely any of the men slumbered.

Beals called Jim to him again: "Tell me about Simpson."

Jim told of their talks and Simpson's mysterious hints.

"I've been watchin' him lately around Fort Wallace," the sergeant said. "Saw how he always made talk with young Cheyennes and Sioux who passed through. Thought he had the makin's of a renegade in him."

The moon came up and within an hour it was light enough for those in the encampment to see shadows against the snow. The men began feeling the tension of inactivity. Jim began wondering if the Indians had drawn off if they guessed the detachment was prepared to receive them. If they had, it would make him look like a fool who had given a false alarm, and Blaney probably would gloat.

"It'll prob'ly come just before dawn, as usual," Sergeant Beals said to Jim.

They strolled around the camp. Lieutenant Blaney was sitting in front of the small tent that had been pitched for him, with a blanket draped around his shoulders. Jim sensed his feelings—the men had disarmed him and taken charge of his first independent detail in the field. His official record would be blackened almost before it began.

But Cheyenne Jim had no feeling of gloating over Blaney's predicament. No doubt, Jim thought, he had been well schooled in military matters. But he had only book learning, not valuable experience in the field to harden him. A man couldn't be a real soldier until he had heard the rattle of guns, the singing of lethal bullets, had known the pungent odor of burning powder, had seen blood, and men wounded and dead.

Blaney did not look or speak to them as they passed near him. As they walked on, one of the guards challenged in the distance. A gun cracked on the frosty air, Hoofs pounded the frozen ground, and there was a disturbance among the horses and mules.

"Here they come!" Beals said. He unbuttoned the flap of his holster as shots came from two sides of the encampment.

"The Injuns are commencin' to circle," Cheyenne Jim said.

Beals began shouting orders. Men ran to positions previously assigned to drop behind cover and watch for targets. It was growing light. A thin line of Indians encircled them, riding their ponies in a continual parade, zigzagging so they would be poorer targets, swinging to the off-sides of their ponies. They numbered four times the men in the camp. Firing started. A mule was struck.

"They're commencin' to tighten the circle," Jim said.

Wild yells came from the encircling foes. Wild yells of defiance from troopers answered. Suddenly, all the Indians turned their ponies toward the encampment and charged.

Guns blazed on all sides of the camp as the troopers began a heavy fire. Indians dropped from the bare backs of their ponies to sprawl on the frozen ground. The other savages began circling again, retreating a short distance. Fire arrows arched through the sky to drop upon or near the packs that formed barricades.

ANOTHER charge came. Cheyenne Jim saw a rider he knew was Pete Simpson, fired at him and missed. Two troopers were hit. The enemy retreated

again, but only to continue circling.

"They'll try to ride over us the next time," Beals shouted to his men. "Stand to 'em! Beat 'em off this time, and we'll have 'em!"

Again the enemy charged. Cheyenne Jim darted from spot to spot, firing rapidly. Beals was running around shouting orders. Hank Mannox had blood streaming from a shoulder wound, but was still firing.

The enemy was working in close, leaving dead and wounded behind. Jim turned to get more ammunition, and noticed Lieutenant Blaney again. Blaney had changed. His face was aflame with the rage of battle now. He had picked up a weapon a dying trooper had dropped and was using it like a sharpshooter.

The enemy was rushing again. Half were dismounted now, crawling over frozen ground from cover to cover and getting in nearer.

"Pick off the crawlers!" Jim heard Beals shout.

Jim ran toward a rock to drop behind it, and found himself at Lieutenant Blaney's side. The lieutenant had picked up a holster gun somewhere and was using it like a veteran.

"At 'em, Cheyenne!" he shouted almost in Jim's ear.

As he spoke, he sprang up to dart to another rock. Jim saw him reel and knew he had been hit. He collapsed, and Jim could tell he had received a leg wound and could not stand. Jim ran to him. As he reached Blaney's side, he felt the impact of a bullet in his own left shoulder.

"Hurt bad, sir?" Jim asked. He did not realize he had said 'sir.'

"Got one in leg," Blaney answered. "I'm all right—carry on! On your left, Cheyenne!"

Jim was in time to drop the Indian who charged afoot. Some of the troopers were upon their feet now, yelling and charging from cover. Dead and wounded Indians dotted the sides of the knoll. A short distance away, Pete Simpson was sprawled dead, his career as a renegade over.

Blaney was still firing at retreating savages. Jim knew they had lost so heavily that there would not be another attack.

Beals was shouting orders again. Unhurt troopers were checking the damage. A badly wounded mule was destroyed. A small fire among the packs was extinguished. Order was being restored.

Jim realized he was bandaging Blaney's leg wound. He was astonished to find all feeling of animosity for Blaney had left him. "He was just a greenie, but got to be a man," Jim thought. "And he sure can use his fists! Bet he'll make a good officer when he's been in the game longer."

"There you are, sir," Jim said, as he finished the bandage.

"You're a good man in a fight, Carroll."

"So are you, sir."

"Call Sergeant Beals, please."

Jim was astonished at that "please;" he yelled at the sergeant and Beals came hurrying.

"How about your own wound, Carroll?" Blaney asked.

"Little more than a burn, sir. One of the troopers can fix me up.

Sergeant Beals arrived. "One man dead, five wounded, includin' you two, one mule and one horse dead," the sergeant reported. "The enemy lost heavily. They won't be back."

"Thanks, Sergeant Beals," Blaney replied. "Please take these two guns. Though I'd been disarmed and was under technical military arrest as an insane man, I took the liberty of getting into the fight."

"A good thing you did, sir!"

"Sergeant, I admit I was suffering from a touch of insanity when you disarmed me. Fatigue and strain over responsibility. I'll file no charges against you or any of the others."

"Thank you, sir," Beals said. "Allow me to return the Lieutenant's own gun. Any orders, sir?"

"You mean you want me to retain command?"

"The men watched the Lieutenant under fire for the first time, sir. They saw you risk your life a couple of times. We watched you and Cheyenne Jim fightin' side by side. You may depend on it, sir, that no man will say anything to indicate but what you were in command of the detachment all the time."

BLANEY'S eyes glistened. "You and the men—mighty fine lot!" he said. "Jim Carroll here—be glad to have him

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A bullet from the breed's gun knocked Randell to his knees

GLORY FOR A Gun Doctor

Out of his gnawing fear, Dallas summons the courage to redeem himself in battle thunder!

By LARRY HARRIS

IF THE four men, three were killers, tough-visaged and gun-hung, bearing the unmistakable renegade brand. They had never been known to give a man a chance for his life. All three of them had shot men in the back; and that is what they intended to do to the fourth man after they were through with him tonight. The man called Dallas was going to die.

The red brasada dust stirred under the hoofs of their slow-moving horses. They rode in single file through dense thickets of black chaparral and prickly pear. Thorny limbs clawed at their legs. Overhead the fiery afternoon sun beat down upon them with intolerable heat.

A covey of blue topknot quail raced through the mesquite grass of a clearing, and Clegg Flood, the leader, reined in. He lifted one hand from the butt of his holstered six-shooter and pawed the sweat from his face. He was a big, thick-shouldered man with a flat, broken nose and restless, bloodshot eyes. As the other riders pulled up beside him he looked at Dallas and grinned without mirth.

"Standin' the heat all right, Dallas?" he asked.

"I think so, Flood," Dallas answered quietly.

But it was plain that he wasn't. It might have been the heat, or it might have been fear that caused his pallor. With a man like Dallas it was hard to determine what was happening inside him. Compared to his three companions he was a small man. He was still this side of thirty, but the hurt, tortured look in his eyes made him look older. His broad-brimmed hat, dark suit and boots were dusty. There was a holstered six-shooter beneath his coat and a black satchel hooked over his kak horn.

"Hell is a sight hotter than this, Dallas," Clegg Flood said. "Keep that in mind when we get into town. There was only one man that ever tried to double-cross me, and he's dead now. Savvy what I mean?"

"Sure I do, Flood," Dallas said.

The one called Brazos Red scowled. He was a great lumbering brute of a man, red-bearded and pale-eyed, with a dozen cold-blooded murders along his back trail. "He's too much of a city dude to trust with the chore yuh've given him, Flood," he said flatly.

"You can shoot, can't yuh, Dallas?" Flood asked.

"I've shot a little—at targets."

CLEGG FLOOD looked at all three of his men: at Brazos Red, the killer; at Carros, the fat, pock-marked breed who was handy with knife or gun. Then he cut another glance at Dallas, and his grin was gone. There was a dangerous glint in his eyes and a deadly threat in his voice.

"It'll be a human target tonight, Dallas," Flood said in a harsh voice. "There's no difference in shootin' at a tree or a man. One falls and the other one don't, that's all. When yuh rode into our camp a week ago—with the law on yore trail—we hid yuh out. Yuh're payin' us back for that favor tonight. Mess up the deal and yuh'll curse the day yuh was ever born. Dressed as yuh are, and actin' like yuh do, you can do the job without causin' suspicion.

"The three of us can blast the bank apart and take care of the townspeople. It's Sheriff Jeff Grady I'm thinkin' about. He's a one-time Ranger and tough as the hubs of hell when the goin' gets rough. He's the jigger that helped wipe out Sam Bass and his crew. The bank in Haskel is jammed with money after a good ranchin' year. It's ours if we've got the nerve to take it. We can make a four-way split and head for South America. Sheriff Grady is the only reason the job ain't been done before. My idea is to get him out of the way first. You savvy exactly what yuh're to do, Dallas?"

"Yes, Flood."

"Then let's go."

They rode on as silently as before. At sundown, deep in the tumbled hills, they came upon a small, tree-flanked creek. The men watered their horses and sat down to wait for darkness. As the gloom deepened, mosquitoes became a torment. Butcher birds fluttered in the dense brush. Once a white-tailed deer bounded out of the shinnery nearby, saw the men, then bounded off.

The men listened, saying nothing, as men do when they know that capture means death. Flood strolled down the creek bank a ways. Brazos Red followed him, a hulking beast of a man with two bone-handled six-shooters at his hips.

When they were alone Brazos Red said softly: "Tonight will be the last for Dallas, Flood. We're not takin' him along."

"I'm not crazy, Red," said Flood.

They walked back to where Dallas and the breed sat waiting. "We'll ride into town together, boys," Flood explained. "You'll be the lookout, Red. Carros and I will get into the bank through the rear door. You'll go direct to the sheriff's office, Dallas. There's not one chance in fifty that he'll recognize yuh. Tell him his wife's been hurt. Take him out home and keep him there.

"He's got a corral back of the house. When we ride past you have fresh horses waitin' for us. We'll cut straight south for the Border." Flood's voice was soft, evil. "You're one of us whether yuh like it or not, Dallas. Yuh'll have to kill Sheriff Grady when yuh get him home. And tie up his wife. That's part of the deal."

That three-mile ride into Haskel was a nightmare to the man called Dallas. The night heat burned into his tired, aching body. He tried to shut from his mind all that had happened, but it was no use. He felt the cowardice inside him, an ugly,

monstrous thing over which he had no control. A clammy, horrible fear held him, worse than any disease a man could know.

Out of the darkness came the phantom voice of the judge: "Aiding and abetting a criminal . . ."

Dallas hadn't meant to break the law. He'd tried to explain to the judge that you can't see a man suffer and not do anything about it. Dallas didn't know the man had just killed two people and had been wounded in the getaway. The murderer hadn't looked like such a bad sort. He'd told Dallas he'd been shot accidentally when cleaning his gun. After he'd left, the police came. They told Dallas what had really happened and held him as an accomplice of the man he had helped.

Friends came to the jail and told Dallas they had raised the necessary bond. He was free until the trial, the lawyer said. An understanding jury might have acquitted him; but Dallas hadn't waited to find out. Fear, the wild, uncontrollable fear that destroys all reason, had made him run.

So he had ridden into the tumbled, lawless brasada, his face set in lines of desperation, his suffering steadily increasing. He came to know shame, and time and again he was on the verge of turning back. Yet he kept running, forcing himself with a harshness of will that he had never previously known, at a price painful above anything he had ever endured.

Into his own personal hell he rode, conscious of what he was doing. The running away took courage, but he was not aware of it. It was the misdirected courage of a coward, the greatest courage of all.

A week ago, exhausted and half-starved, he had ridden into Clegg Flood's camp. Dallas, he said his name was. He didn't need to say more, for Flood and his renegades had heard the story of Dallas' arrest and escape. . . .

WITH a start, he came back to the present as they emerged upon a lonely, brush-hemmed wagon road. There was no moon, and that was in their favor. Darkness and heat pressed down upon them like a smothering blanket; the creak of leather and dull thud of the horses' hoofs in the dirt were the only sounds.

A mile or so outside Haskel they passed a small ranch-house. It set back off the road, half hidden away in the mesquite. Lamplight gleamed from the front windows. Corrals and outbuildings were only heavier shadows in the night.

"That's Sheriff Grady's place, Dallas," Flood said. "But from all I hear, he stays in town till around ten o'clock."

They met no one along the road into town. They rode leisurely, as honest brush-poppers ride, but Dallas felt the tension of the other three men as they passed the outlying homes. Haskel was like any cowtown in the brush country with its unpainted frame houses along the single main street. There were black-barked mesquite trees in the yards, and a few picket fences.

In the center of town, the false-fronted buildings were huddled together like huge boxes. Lamplight speared through the fly-specked windows, reaching out to the lined hitch-poles. The dark walks echoed to the jangle of spurs, the strident undertone of man-made sounds. There were a saloon and the usual number of stores. Buckboards and saddled horses flanked the street on both sides.

Dallas spotted the sheriff's office as Clegg Flood guided his men over to a hitch-pole. A chill, sick feeling washed through him when the big outlaw leader nodded significantly. Dallas slipped to the ground while the others remained on their horses. He saw the dark windows of the bank a few doors away.

In the sweltering darkness he crossed the walk, passing two women with shopping baskets on their arms. A bracketed kerosene lamp burned inside the lawman's office, but when Dallas opened the door, he saw the place was deserted.

He went cold all over when a man paused on the walk behind him and asked: "Huntin' the sheriff, mister?"

Dallas nodded. "Yes," he said.

"I ain't noticed him around since the middle of the afternoon. Judge Ricker was just in there and left the lamp burnin'. I reckon yuh'll find Sheriff Grady out home. Know where he lives?"

"Yes, I know," Dallas replied.

Flood and his men were off their horses when Dallas returned to them and reported the sheriff's absence. No one no-

ticed them in the darkness. Flood said, his voice low, flat, "That's just as well, Dallas. Head on back to his house, do as you were told—and wait for us."

Dallas made no pretense of hurrying as he rode back out of town. The clammy fear inside him made him feel sick and weak. He told himself he was free of Flood and his men now and was filled with a clamoring, wild urge to keep going. With all his heart and soul he hated Flood and the other two men; he hated the crime and deception that was part of them. But even more he hated himself for cowardice.

Sweat trickled down his face as he neared the sheriff's little ranch. The six-shooter at his hip was like a leaden weight, dragging him lower into the depths of degradation. He knew, even before he got there, that he would go inside the sheriff's house. He knew it, because he was afraid to do otherwise. If he didn't, Clegg Flood would hunt him down and kill him. Flood was that kind. And despite his misery, Dallas didn't want to die.

He rode into the ranch yard and halted near the front gallery. He had barely dismounted when the door opened. A woman stood on the threshold, holding a lamp in one hand.

"Oh," she said. "I thought it was Pa."

Dallas fumbled with his hat. "I'm looking for the sheriff, ma'am," he said.

The woman said this was the sheriff's house. "He's not here just now. But he's due back any minute. Won't you come inside and wait?"

She was gray-haired and plump, with a motherly look about her. If her eyes had not been filled with a dreadful uneasiness, Dallas thought they would be kind and understanding. Her neat gingham dress made a rustling sound as she placed the lamp on a small table. It was a tidy living room with horsehair furniture and an organ in one corner.

A sort of panic filled Dallas as he sat down in one of the chairs. He heard the woman say she was Mrs. Grady and something about the awful heat. Then she went back to the front door and peered outside into the night. She kept fumbling with her apron as she talked.

"You're a stranger in these parts I take it," she said.

"Just rode in tonight," Dallas replied.

Mrs. Grady returned to her rocker beside the table. She kept listening and waiting, and when the awkward silence became too much she said tremulously: "I wish Pa would hurry."

DALLAS knew something was wrong; he could feel the crushing load of apprehension in the room. An inner voice screamed at him to leave. He kept twisting his hat, conscious that the woman was watching him. When he looked up their eyes met.

"What's the matter, Mrs. Grady?" he heard himself say.

She told him then, for anxiety made her respond to the sympathy in Dallas' voice. Their daughter Nancy, she said, was terribly sick. She had been stricken suddenly this afternoon.

"She's in bed now," Mrs. Grady continued. "I don't know what it is. She's never been sick like this before. Pa rode to fetch the town doctor. That was over two hours ago. He's had more than time to be back."

Dallas was silent a long time. In the lamplight his face was ashen. "I know something about medicine," he said. "I'll take a look at your daughter, if you want me to."

Surprise and hope filled the woman's eyes. "Why—I'd take it kindly if you would."

Dallas followed her into the adjoining room. The girl was lying on the bed, covered with a clean white sheet. She was in her early twenties, dark-haired and blue-eyed. Her startling beauty, her dead-white pallor and wide, painshot eyes filled Dallas with a feeling he could not analyze.

"Nancy," said Mrs. Grady, "this man knows something about medicine. He wants to look at you."

The girl smiled despite the pain. "I'll probably be all right by morning," she whispered.

Dallas sat in a chair beside the bed. "Where is the pain?" he asked.

"In my stomach."

"Any particular part?"

She thought a moment, then said, "No, just all over."

Dallas noticed that she was not perspiring and that, despite the pain, she was calm. He took her pulse count. It was high, alarmingly high. He reached

beneath the sheet, tenderly probing her abdomen. Suddenly the girl stiffened, her small fingers clenching in excruciating pain. A low moan escaped her bloodless lips.

"That's where it is," she gasped.

Dallas removed his hand. There was a dull, sick look in his own eyes.

"Try to relax," he said softly.

The girl's eyes closed, for the pain was almost more than she could stand. Mrs. Grady stood at the foot of the bed, her eyes filled with tears. She feared death for her daughter, but there was nothing she could do, except summon all her courage.

"What is it, Doctor?" she whispered.

Dallas said, "She must be operated on immediately."

Mrs. Grady caught her breath. "What will we do?"

The life blood seemed to be flowing out of Dallas' body. He sat like a doomed man, waiting for the end. The girl's eyes opened and there was no fear in them. She seemed to be searching Dallas' very soul, drawing upon him for confidence and courage.

"Appendicitis?" she asked weakly.

"Yes, Nancy."

"Can you do it?"

"Yes."

She smiled. "Whatever you think best. I'm not afraid."

The inner voice cried out: You've got to save this girl's life. But in doing so, you'll be giving up your freedom.

In that moment, strangely enough, Dallas felt none of his old fear and shame. It was as if a spark inside him, long smothered, burst into flame; and he realized that there was something stronger, more fundamental than his own fears and cowardice.

He rose and went into the front room, experiencing a relief that bordered on the spiritual. Never before had he been so calm, so sure of himself. Something had happened. He didn't know what. As long as he lived he'd remember the look in Nancy Grady's eyes when their glances met and she'd said:

"Whatever you think best. I'm not afraid."

Dallas went out to his horse and returned with the black medical kit he had hooked over the kak horn. Mrs. Grady met him in the front room. Hope was hers now, and the desperation was gone. She looked like a woman who had asked God for help and knew her prayer had been answered.

"I don't know you, Doctor," she murmured. "But I've got the feeling we can trust you. Pa would say the same thing, I'm sure, if he was here. Our daughter is in your hands now."

Dallas went into the lamplit kitchen. "Start boiling some water instantly, Mrs. Grady. We'll sterilize the instruments first. You'll have to help."

Dallas stripped to his undershirt and unbuckled his six-shooter. In the kitchen, he washed his face and hands, while Mrs. Grady carried pans of steaming water into the bedroom. Extra lamps were placed on a table at the foot of the bed.

With the instruments boiled, cup and cotton ready, Dallas set to work. He stuffed the cotton into the cup, poured in a few drops of chloroform. There was no tremor in his long-fingered hands.

"Ready, Nancy?" he asked softly.

"All ready, Doctor," she said weakly.

Gently he placed the cup filled with chloroform-saturated cotton over her face. "Breathe deeply," he said.

There was an involuntary struggle for a moment, and then the girl lay quiet. Dallas heard a rider pull up outside. Mrs. Grady hurried into the living room. Then a man's voice, frantic with desperation, came clearly.

"Old Doc Winter left for Austin this mornin', Ma. When I found him gone I rode the ten miles to Ocate. The doctor there was out on a huntin' trip. . . . How is she?"

"It's appendicitis, Pa. The doctor is in there with her now."

"Doctor? What doctor?"

MRS. GRADY was explaining as Sheriff Grady stepped quickly to the bedroom doorway. Dallas glanced up from his work. The man he saw was tall, grizzled, past his prime. His black hat, flannel shirt and denims were dusty. He had a six-shooter at his hip and a lawman's badge pinned to his shirt. The penetrating blue eyes in his honest, weather-beaten face were not those of a swaggering town-tamer. Now he was like any father, distracted and worried because he had been unable to bring help to his daughter.

As their eyes met, Dallas saw the old lawman give an almost imperceptible start. The sheriff's lips moved as if to speak, but he made no sound. And Dallas knew then that his real identity was known. Reward posters, bearing his picture, had undoubtedly been sent to every lawman in the brasada.

Dallas' voice cut through the tension. "Your daughter is seriously ill, Sheriff Grady. An emergency is all that will save her."

Sheriff Grady was still staring. "Can you do it?" he asked.

"Yes."

The lawman walked up to the bedside. His face, working with emotion, was ashen. He looked like a man who was gambling everything worthwhile in life on the turn of a single card.

"Don't make a mistake, Doc. If anything was to go wrong—"

"I understand," Dallas said.

"Ma an' I will stay right here."

"Can you stand it?"

Faces pale, both the sheriff and his wife nodded.

"Remove the mask and pour a few drops into it whenever I tell you," Dallas told the lawman. Then to the trembling woman he said, "Hand me the skin knife."

Swiftly Dallas worked, making a careful incision through the abdominal wall. He tossed the skin knife into the pan of boiling water and called for a scalpel. Quickly, surely, he cut through the various layers, avoiding arteries wherever possible.

"Clamp," he said.

Mrs. Grady was at his side, face pale as death. As if by instinct she passed the required instruments carefully and accurately.

Dallas reached the appendix without difficulty. He ordered more chloroform, then incised the artery leading to the appendix. Another clamp, and in a moment the swollen, infected part was removed.

"Needle and gut," he said softly.

Carefully he began sewing and fitting the layers together. He was not conscious of the sweat that streamed down his face or of the passing of time. This was what he knew and loved—relieving the suffering of a fellow human.

In the hush the old lawman was standing at the foot of the bed. He was holding one of the lamps in his hand now. The sickening smell of chloroform filled the hot room.

And then, far off, they heard the sound of shooting. Feeling the lawman's eyes upon him, Dallas glanced up from his work. Then neatly, precisely, he finished the task. Layer upon layer was closed, and finally the abdominal wall was sutured tight.

"Remove the mask," he told Mrs. Grady.

"She—she's all right?" the lawman whispered.

Dallas straightened as if with a great effort. Now that the job was done his strength was gone. There was something tragic about the way he stood, knowing that his freedom was the forfeit. Carefully he drew the sheet over the girl's body.

He said softly, "I'd stake my life, Sheriff Grady, that Nancy will be all right. I've done all I could do."

He walked into the kitchen and washed his hands. When he turned, he saw Sheriff Grady standing in the doorway. There was no pretense now, and Dallas was glad. One man represented the law; the other was a man who had a debt to pay to society, according to the precepts of that law. And they were both conscious of it.

"My name is Doctor Jim Randell, Sheriff," Dallas said.

"I recognized you the minute I saw you, Doc. Where did you ride in from?"

"I've been hiding out with Clegg Flood and his outlaw bunch," Randell told him. "That shooting we heard was them robbing the bank. There's nothing you can do now, Sheriff. Only wait. They'll ride past here any minute."

"You were in on the deal?"

"I was to kill you and have fresh horses waiting for them when they came past."

"You thought you could get by with it?" The sheriff sounded more curious than angry.

Doctor Jim Randell grinned wanly, despite the hurt inside him. "I never shot a man in my life, Sheriff, and I didn't aim to tonight. Clegg Flood was a fool to assign me such a chore. I've done some of the clearest thinking in my life tonight, Grady—and I kind of see what a spineless jelly-fish I've been—"

Sheriff Grady held up his hand. "Listen!"

Dallas said, "There they come!"

He whirled, dashing past the sheriff into the bedroom. From the chair he snatched up his six-shooter and made for the front as riders wheeled up outside. As if in a nightmare he heard Sheriff Grady shout at him and give chase. Then he was outside, walking toward the dim figures of two men on horseback. Clegg Flood's irate bawl leaped out of the shadows.

"Dallas! Where are the horses? Hurry! They got Brazos Red in the getaway—"

Clegg Flood and Carros were off their horses, clutching two bulging saddle-bags. They had spotted the sheriff's horse off to one side in the darkness and must have thought there was another mount nearby. In the excitement, none of them saw Sheriff Grady dart out the rear kitchen door.

"You're not getting away either, Flood," Randell heard himself say. "This is the end of the trail for you and Carros!"

Time stood still for young Jim Randell who had run from fear. He heard voices, but nothing made sense. Flood and Carros were before him, bellowing, clawing at their six-shooters, vague, blurry shadows of death. From somewhere in his memory a voice came to Jim Randell:

There's no difference in shooting at a tree or a man. One falls and the other one don't, that's all. . . . Pull the trigger of your gun!

A RED mist exploded before his eyes; his ears were deafened by a strange concussion. From then on he was aware of no rational thought. He was walking headlong into a blazing dream, without fear or pain, a strange, wild exultancy roaring through him—a nerveless reaction as the shackles of his cowardice fell from him. It seemed that his gun, once a dead weight, had suddenly leaped alive. Flaming, crashing, it bestowed upon him power he had never known before.

He simply pointed the weapon at Clegg Flood as if it were his finger, and the outlaw went down. The bullet from the breed's gun knocked Randell to his knees. Miraculously, he heard Sheriff Grady shooting and yelling. Then the lawman was at his side, and townspeople were riding up into the yard around them. Their talk ebbed and flowed; but the clamoring turmoil in Randell had subsided.

Through dimming eyes Randell saw the stars glimmering overhead in the dark heavens. He had never seen them look so clean and pure—like the eyes of Nancy Grady. He felt a physical pain now, but his spiritual torture had been dissolved. His heart beat with new strength, pouring new hope into his veins. Never again, he knew, would fear be a part of him. Whatever his penalty to society, he wanted to pay it and start life anew.

Out of the shadows came Sheriff Grady's voice, speaking so no one else could hear. "No man could be a coward an' do what you've done, Jim. Remember that, son. There's fear in all men. A brave man just knows how to handle it—and you learned tonight."

"Too late," said Jim Randell.

"I don't believe so," came the answer.

There was a lot of commotion in and around the little cowtown of Haskel that night. Folks down there still tell how Doc Jim Randell killed two bank-robbers and saved the loot, and how Sheriff Jeff Grady was forced to hold his fire for fear of hitting him—until the very end. They will tell you that Doc Randell is one of the best medico-surgeons in Texas, and one of the finest men you ever met.

Only a very few folks ever learned of Jim Randell's past, and to them it made no difference. As proud old Sheriff Grady said, "It's not what a man was, but what he is that counts." That is what he told the governor of Texas, and evidently the governor saw things in the same light, for Randell was barely able to be up and about before the pardon came through.

Nancy Grady became well and strong. When she and Randell were married the whole town of Haskel turned out for the ceremony. Nancy was all dressed in white, and crying, as happy as a girl can be. And Jim Randell had a lump in his throat, because all his hopes and dreams were coming true.

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Rattlesnake starts throwin' so fast it looks like a stream of glitterin' steel

Carnival Cut-Ups

Shoo-fly, Puggy and Ike are all set for big doin's when Mulligan's Mammoth Marvel Show comes to town!

IT DON'T TAKE long for the word to travel when a town shows it's got some git up an' git to it, that it can take on the holiday spirit and make a little whoopee now and then. Like Cactus City, for example.

We'd throwed our Trail Bust, which was a rodeo that had everything. Outside of bein' a mite bigger, mebbe, the big shows at Cheyenne and Pendleton and Salinas didn't have a thing we didn't. Then when the bee-heads down at Dead Horse Junction git proud and challenge Cactus City to a prize fight for the champeenship of Cactus County, we took 'em on, pronto.

We bet our money free and easy and we win. Likewise and besides, our man

A Cactus City Story by L. P. HOLMES

licks their man and when them Dead Horse Junction short sports want to make an issue of it, why we all pitched in and give Dead Horse Junction a lickin' en masse, as the poet feller would say. All in all, Cactus City has done earned a reputation for fun lovin' and frollickin' and free-spendin' which has traveled plenty.

Which is why this carnival outfit comes to town.

I and "Puggy" Jimpson and "Shoo-fly" Davis we been puttin' in a couple weeks helpin' "Buck" Kyle and his boys clean up on the fall calf brandin'. We're shaggin' it back to town and we git there just in time to see this carnival layout pullin' in. They got a whole scatterin' of wagons, painted red and yeller and blue, loaded with all manner of stuff. There's a flock of jiggers on one wagon whoopin' things up with band music, which likes to scare mine and Puggy's and Shoo-fly's broncs into fits.

There's some women folks up on another wagon and they cheer and wave and laugh to I and Puggy and Shoo-fly whilst our broncs are lettin' out the kinks. Which applause from the gentle sex kind of goes to Puggy's head, I reckon, for instead of pullin' leather, sensible-like, Puggy goes to ridin' free and fancy, and ends up by gettin' piled into a cactus bush. At which them women folks really whoop and holler.

BY THE time I and Shoo-fly has got Puggy's bronc rounded up, and him pulled out of the cactus bush, them carnival wagons has hit town and are peeradin' down Main Street with that band goin' full blast.

"Lissen to 'em, will yuh?" snarls Puggy, cussin' plenty and pullin' cactus burrs all at the same time. "Ought to be a law agin such a racket. Scarin' folks' broncs an' gittin' a feller pitched into a cactus bush."

"Yore own fault," says Shoo-fly, plumb unsympathetic. "Tried to pull a show-off in front of them female women and got yoreself chucked. Me, I'm fond of band music. Stirs my blood. Makes me want to grab a gun and go to war."

"What war?" I asks. "Ain't no war."

"Any old war," says Shoo-fly. "If'n there ain't one goin' on, why then I git a yearnin' to start one. Me, I'd like to play in a band."

"Not me," sniffs Puggy. "Ketch me snortin' in one of them horn arrangements. High Pockets Magee told me that he heard once of a jigger who blew into one of them horn things so hard he bust a lung and couldn't talk above a whisper from then on."

"Ain't the horns I like," says Shoo-fly. "It's the drum. That big 'un. That old tumpity-tumpity one. I'd shore like me a job at whalin' the stuffin's out of one of them big drums. *Ka-whoom! Ka-whoom! Ka-whoom!* That's the kind of music that's man talk, yuh betcha."

Me, Ike Ferris, I'd noticed somethin' that had me thinkin', so now I mentions it.

"You hooty-corns notice the sign on that band wagon? It said Mulligan's Mammoth Marvel Shows. I'm wonderin' if this here Mulligan is any relation to Shanty Mike. If'n he is, mebbe Shanty Mike can rustle us some free tickets."

"That," says Shoo-fly, "is a right salubrious idee, Ike. A penny saved is a penny earned, so Hamlet said. And by gummy, he's right."

"Hamlet?" grunts Puggy. "Never heard tell of him. Where's he rack his saddle?"

Shoo-fly gives Puggy a scornful glance. "Hamlet wa'nt no ordinary bee-headed cowpunch," he sniffs. "Hamlet was the hombre who writ the Declaration of Independence."

Now if there's anything I'm a stickler for, it's gettin' history straight. So of course I had to correct Shoo-fly.

"Yuh're wrong, Shoo-fly," I says. "Hamlet was the gent who fit and won the Battle of Waterloo."

"Is zat so!" yaps Shoo-fly. "Well then, if'n Hamlet didn't write that there Declaration, who did?"

"I know," brags Puggy. "Our forefathers writ her."

"Our which?" comes back Shoo-fly. "What's the matter, can't you count? Where do yuh git that four fathers stuff, when there's only three of us? Likewise and besides, my ol' man never writ nothin'. Because he couldn't. Or could he read, neither. I don't think you junipers know as much as yuh claim."

There ain't no way of tellin' just where

that argument might of ended up, but about then there's some wild yellin' in town and out of the end of Main Street busts a buckboard, the team runnin' crazy and with nobody at the reins. Jouncin' along at the ends of the halter ropes is about thirty feet of hitch rail which them broncs, plumb spooked out of their skins by that band music, had drug up by the roots.

I and Puggy and Shoo-fly, we lights out after the runaway, and by the time we'd got it stopped and untangled we'd forgot all about history and was gettin' plumb excited about the present. . . .

Mulligan's Mammoth Marvel Show sets up for business on the flat out back of "Shanty Mike" Mulligan's International Hotel. When I braces Shanty Mike about him bein' a relation to the owner of the show and therefore how's chances for some free tickets, Shanty Mike scowls plumb mean-like.

"That there Mulligan ain't no relation to this here Mulligan," growls Mike. "He's fat and red-headed, and I ain't. Likewise and besides, he wouldn't even come through with a free ticket for me, let alone a handful of 'em to hand around to moochers like you. You and Puggy and Shoo-fly see that show, yuh'll pay yore way in, same as other upstandin' citizens."

Which bad news I relays to Puggy and Shoo-fly, so we goes over to the sheriff's office and hits up "Bosco" Bates for a lil' loan until Buck Kyle can get around to payin' us what we got comin' in wages.

BOSCO, he hands us five cartwheels apiece, along with a tough warnin'.

"That's to spend seein' the show, not to buy up drinkin' likker with. You junebugs remember that. I ketch yuh spoonin' snake juice into yore gullets, I'll shore make yuh hard to unravel."

It's plumb amazin' how the word spreads that there's a carnival come to Cactus City. Come sundown the whole dang country is smokin' up with dust trails where folks is linin' in. Durned if they don't hear about it plumb down at Dead Horse Junction, and though this is cause for 'em to git even more jealouser of us than usual, them Junction bee-heads come flockin' around.

I and Puggy and Shoo-fly, we hits for the li'l cabin we got at the edge of town and does a mite of shavin' and washin' and slickin' up. With all them women folks that's with the show, we figger it wouldn't be quite the right thing to show up full of dust and cow hair and whiskers.

The show gits off to an early start. There's flare lights stuck up everywhere, makin' things all rosy and gay. There's a whole horseshoe of tents set up and in the center of everything is the band, whoopity bangin' fit to kill. There's little layouts where yuh kin buy peanuts and popcorn and slickery candy, and drink pink lemonade. There's games of chance where, if'n yuh win yuh kin pick a prize of a fat-faced doll with yaller hair and a frilly dress. There's a shootin' gallery where yuh kin pop away with .22 rifles at li'l ducks, travelin' on a string. And then there's the side shows.

I and Puggy and Shoo-fly we ambles up and stops in front of the first one. The sign out front says:

MINNIE THE MONSTER!
FATTEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD
PAY A DIME AND SEE MINNIE
LIFT A COW WITH HER TEETH!

This has Shoo-fly plumb bug-eyed.

"Can yuh beat that?" he gulps. "That there fat female lifts a cow with her teeth. Me, I've seen some purty husky cow wrastlers in my time, but I never see one what could swing a cow critter in their teeth. I got to see this!"

So, along with a slew of other folks, we buys our tickets and goes in. Minnie the Monster, she's sittin' up there on a platform with her arms folded whilst she looks the crowd over with a cold and calculatin' eye, as the poet feller would say. She's dressed in red tights and she sort of bulges here and there, for a fact. But Puggy, he's disappointed.

"Where do they get that stuff about the fattest woman in the world!" he grumbles. "We got one right here in Cactus City that's got her beat four ways from the ace. When it comes to bein' fat, Missis Jake Pickle can give Minnie cards and spades and still—"

"Were you makin' personal remarks about me?" cuts in a voice right behind us.

We turns, simultaneous, and there's Missis Jake Pickle herself, givin' pore

Puggy a look that like to cut his heart out. Jake Pickle is with his Missis, trompin' first on one foot, then on the other, and lookin' plumb uncomfortable.

"You low, drunken rowdy!" says Missis Jake, low and poisonlike. "If Jake Pickle was even half a man, he'd thrash your miserable soul. The idea, with you makin' insultin' remarks about American womanhood. Jake—do something!"

Pore Jake, he wiggles and squirms like he had fleas.

"Now—now, mama," he pleads. "No cause to get het up. Old Puggy, he didn't mean nothin' wrong. He was jest sort of addin' and subtractin'."

"Is that so!" squalls Missis Jake, turnin' on Jake like a prairie fire. "You meanin' to say you agree with that—that viper?"

Pore Jake! He knows what's comin' up, and he ducks, just in time, else the swipe Mama aims at him would of tore his head off. He keeps right on duckin' and runnin' and busts out the door of the place into blessed freedom. Mama Jake goes after him and we hear her outside hollerin' about gettin' her money back 'cause she can't wait around to see Minnie the Monster lift a cow with her teeth.

But I and Puggy and Shoo-fly, we stick around, and when the tent is plumb jammed with curious folks, Minnie does her act. They bring in the cow and right away Shoo-fly has his say.

"That ain't no cow," he squalls. "That ain't nothin' but a li'l bitty bald-faced waffle-head of a calf that's been took away from its ma too soon."

I GOT to admit Shoo-fly has a point there. It's jest a calf, shore enough, and a little one and skinny as sin. But I grabs Shoo-fly and tells him to shut up, because there's some mighty tough-lookin' menfolks travelin' with this here carnival, and I see a couple of 'em kind of pushin' through the crowd in our direction.

"Keep still, yuh danged li'l bee-head," I scolds Shoo-fly. "What d'yuh want for a dime, anyhow? Yuh want that Minnie should lift a ellyphunt? Yuh want that the pore woman should bust a jaw?"

Shoo-fly, he quiets down, and Minnie goes to work. They sling a sort of belly-band around this here runt of a calf, which has a gimmick to it where Minnie can set her teeth. Minnie, she bends over, braces her hands on a couple of saw-hosses, bows her neck and heaves. Shore enough, she swings that calf free of the ground, with Minnie gruntin' and the calf bellerin' kind of mournful-like.

Minnie sets the calf down, looks around and grins mechanical-like, and them two men bouncers begin clearin' the tent for the next crowd.

Outside Shoo-fly says, "I still say we was cheated. Somethin' tells me we got a flock of tinhorns in our midst, Ike."

"We shore were lied to." Puggy nods. "Minnie's fat, but not that fat. And what she lifted won't be a cow for three-four years yet. If'n it ain't starved to death in the mean time."

"You jiggers is too particular," I says. "Don't expect too much for a dime. Ah! Here's somethin doin'."

There's a stand out in front of the next tent and on it rears a tall gent with a black mustache and goatee with long black hair hangin' plumb down around his shoulders. He's all flossed up in buckskin clothes with fancy frills down the legs and arms. He's got on a big, floppy roll-brim hat with a rattlesnake band around it. His belt is rattlesnake skin, too. He's even got on a rattlesnake skin tie, with half a dozen rattles hangin' from the end of it. He shore was one snaky hombre, that gent.

In his hands he's got about half a dozen big, shiny, heavy bladed knives, which all of a sudden he begins tossin' around in the air plumb amazin'-like. Them knives is jest one glitterin' stream, up and down, whirlin' over and over. This feller never drops a one, but keeps 'em spinnin' and spinnin'. I tell yuh it was somethin' to see.

About now the hombre in the ticket booth for this tent sets up a holler.

"Step right up, ladeez and gents! Step right up and see a free show. Yuh're lookin' at Rattlesnake Rollins, the greatest knife throwin' expert in the world! See the way he juggles them deadly, razor-sharp knives. And for a dime, one tenth part of a dollar, yuh can step inside the tent and see Rattlesnake Rollins throw them knives. Yuh can see him outline his beautiful assistant against a wall with cold, flashing steel. Yuh will see him throw knives between her spread fingers, see him pin a lock of her golden hair

to the wall. But not once—not once, ladeez and gentlemen, will Rattlesnake Rollins so much as touch the beautiful assistant's flesh. This is breath-takin', this is stupendous, folks, and all it costs yuh is one thin dime. Get yore tickets now, for the show starts in just one minute!"

This "Rattlesnake" Rollins, he hops down and goes into the tent. I and Puggy and Shoo-fly, we reach for our dimes.

Right behind us somebody growls:

"I hope that fancy rattlesnake jigger makes good. 'Cause if he don't, somebody is goin' to get hurt."

I turn for a look and see "Catface" Collins, who is a plenty rough, tough hombre, any way yuh look at him. Right behind Catface is Johnny Longo, a nice, quiet young feller who has a little bachelor spread back in the green grass bench country of the Piney Hills.

"Hiyah, Johnny," I says. "Long way from home, ain't yuh?"

"Mebbe, Ike," Johnny answers. "But a feller gits lonesome for other folks, now and then."

Inside, there's a roped-off space reachin' plumb across the tent. Against one wall is a sort of board backstop, all scarred and cut where knives have stuck into it. Plumb over at the other wall is a bench with whole slathers of them throwin' knives on it. That's where Rattlesnake Rollins is standin', talkin' with a girl when we come in.

In back of me I hear Johnny Longo kinda catch his breath. I also hear Catface Collins mumble, "Holy cats! That there is the purtiest gal I ever see. Don't tell me she's the one old Rattlesnake chucks them knives at!"

I takes me a good look at this girl and I see that Catface is more'n half right. She's a cute li'l muggins, for a fact. Jest a mite thin, mebbe, and with big, dark eyes that seem sort of sad and wistful and worried-like.

ABOUT that time an old feller comes slippin' into the tent by some back way. He's a meek-lookin' li'l jigger, kind of tired and worried and wistful, just like the girl. The girl turns and says somethin' to him and her voice sounds low and sweet and rich as the song of honey bees in the sage in springtime.

She's plumb gentle with the old feller, but Rattlesnake Rollins ain't. When he says somethin' to the old feller there's a snarl in his voice and the old feller sort of cringes, like a dog does when it's been whipped real cruel.

Shoo-fly don't miss a bit of this.

"I don't like Rattlesnake," he says, sort of low-like. "I don't like no part of him. If'n he don't give me a real run for my dime, I'll tell him things."

So about now this show is ready to start. The old feller, he gathers up a whole armful of them knives, all layin' the same direction, and stands beside Rattlesnake. The girl, she crosses the tent, backs up to them boards and spreads her arms.

Johnny Longo makes another funny sound and I see him starin' at that girl like she was an angel just down out of heaven. Whilst Catface Collins, he cusses deep and soft.

"If'n Rattlesnake chucks one of them knives wrong," he says, "if'n he just so much as touches one little bitty finger of her, then I throw my gun and shoot him right here and now."

But Rattlesnake, he don't miss nohow. He takes a flock of knives from the old feller and starts 'em spinnin' in the air. Then, all of a sudden he's throwin' 'em, so fast it seems like there's a solid stream of glitterin' steel flyin' across that tent.

Thuck—thuck—thuck! they go, so fast yuh can't count 'em or watch 'em. Then they're all gone and Rattlesnake is holdin' up his hands, empty, and laughing at the tent full of people.

Over against them boards that girl is plumb outlined in knives, stuck deep in them boards. They's knives between her li'l spread fingers. There's a knife on each side of her slim soft li'l throat, there's knives nestled plumb up agin' her li'l ears. But, by gummies, there ain't a single one of them knives that's actually touchin' her!

"Ol' Rattlesnake shore saved hisself from bein' shot, that trip," Catface Collins growls.

I and Puggy and Shoo-fly, we ain't sayin' a thing. We got our dime's worth this trip, for a fact. But now I see Johnny Longo pushin' through the crowd, over toward the girl who had just stepped out of that frame of knives, a set smile on her pretty face, but with little lines of strain

showin' around her mouth.

Just like there was nobody else in the whole dang tent, Johnny Longo says to the girl:

"I'm Johnny Longo, ma'am. Would yuh tell me yore name?"

Now like I says, Johnny is a nice boy, and a nice-lookin' boy, besides. The girl, she's kind of startled and she stares at him. Then her eyes soften a little and the set smile on her face goes warm and sweet.

"I'm glad to know you, Johnny," she says, in that low, honey-rich voice of hers. "My name is Ruth—Ruth Morgan. Did you like the act?"

"I like—you," says Johnny, quiet and straight.

She goes rosy, plumb to her li'l ears and she looks at Johnny like she was seein' sunshine on tall mountains and listenin' to clean winds blowin' through the timber.

"Why—why, Johnny," she stammers, cute as a startled chickadee bird. "I—I'm glad—you like me."

Of course Rattlesnake Rollins had to bust it up. He yells, kind of tough-like, for the tent to clear, that there's other folks outside, wantin' to see the show. So we all troops out, but Johnny Longo, he buys another ticket, quick, and scoots inside again.

We troops along, I and Puggy and Shoo-fly, spendin' our dimes here'n there, takin' a whirl at all the tents, seein' midgets, and giants, flea-circuses and dog shows and trained mice. We sees the Japanese wrastlers, big and beefy, jumpin' around funny-like, givin' queer yelps, then haulin' and tuggin' and not gettin' no real action at all.

Watchin' 'em is fat Willie Weehaw, the town grocer, who all neither I or Puggy or Shoo-fly is what yuh'd call fond of, for various and sundry reasons, as the poet feller would say. Shoo-fly, he can't resist a dig at Willie.

"Git in there, Willie," he says, "and show 'em wrastlin' that is wrastlin'. They're about yore size and heft. In fact, they looks enough like yuh to be yore blood brothers."

WILLIE swells all up like a mad turkey gobbler and gits twice as red in the face. But he don't sass Shoo-fly, even though Shoo-fly is a scrawny li'l runt, less'n half the size of Willie. 'Cause Shoo-fly takes fire easy and he's kicked Willie in the brisket once before and laid him lower'n a snake in a wagon track. Willie just snorts a couple times and tromps out, mad all over, which gives I and Puggy and Shoo-fly a good laugh and gives us our dime's worth.

So now we comes to the band and Shoo-fly sidles up to the hombre who whales the bass drum and stands there lookin' wistful-like. This bass drum feller ain't a bad-lookin' sort, kind of chunky and jolly. I ketches his eye, wink, and nod at Shoo-fly. The bass drum feller ketches on, grinnin'.

"Hiyuh, pardner," he calls to Shoo-fly. "How about spellin' me for a while? My arm's plumb played out."

Shoo-fly perks up, eager as a kid. "Yuh mean," he gulps, "that I kin hit her a couple licks?"

"Shore—shore," says the feller, hearty-like. "Help yoreself."

He turns his funny li'l round-headed club over to Shoo-fly, who sets down behind the drum and fetches it a couple licks. *Ka-boom, ka-boom,* says the drum. Shoo-fly rolls his eyes and gets a look like a bear in a honey keg. The rest of them band fellers grin and swing right into a fast, stirrin' march.

Shoo-fly begins to swat that old drum and fust thing yuh know, danged if the li'l bee-head ain't keepin' time like he'd been whalin' a bass drum all his life. The band really cuts loose then, and so does Shoo-fly. He throws his hat away, which lets his hair stick straight up. He yips and yells and whoops and all the time never misses a lick with that drum.

Ta-rah! Ta-rah! Ka-boom! Ka-boom!

I'm tellin' yuh, it is the best show of the evenin'. I see Bosco Bates an' Buck Kyle laughin' fit to kill and cheerin' Shoo-fly on. This is high wine to Shoo-fly and just like that kind of likker, goes to his head. He tries to show off, and like the poet feller says, a man gits the fat head, he's due for a tumble.

Shoo-fly has seen the regular bass drum feller swing that li'l club plumb up and over and larrup the other side of the drum, all without missin' time. So now, with another wild whoop, Shoo-fly tries it. But Shoo-fly ain't got the arm reach the drum feller has, and he's kind of crouched far

over that drum. So when he brings that drum club up and around and over, plenty enthusiastic, *smacko!* it lands right on Shoo-fly's chin.

It is the cleanest knock-out yuh ever see. Shoo-fly just folds up and slides down. The rest of the band quit bandin' and throws itself a fit of hi-stericks, right then and there. The crowd goes into fits whilst I and Puggy go up and pack our li'l pardner away from jeers and ridicule. We git him over back of one of the tents, where he begins comin' to agin. And fightin' mad.

"Show him to me," mumbles Shoo-fly. "Show me the low-down sneakin' beehead who hit me when I wa'nt lookin'. Show him to me and I'll drag his gizzard right out with my bare hands!"

I an' Puggy have the darndest time convincin' Shoo-fly that he'd hit hisself with that overgrowed drumstick, and knocked hisself out. But when he is convinced, Shoo-fly just groans and sort of shrivels up and starts sneakin' off like a chicken thief. Puggy feels so sorry for him he follers along, just to make shore Shoo-fly don't cut his own throat in shame. Me, I ambles off the other way and stops sudden-like when I see two dark figgers out back of a tent.

I know they ain't noticed me, but I know too that they will if I try and sneak back the way I come, so I just stand quiet. I'm so close I can hear 'em talkin'. And durn me if it ain't Johnny Longo and that cute li'l Ruth girl that Rattlesnake Rollins throws knives at.

"I knows the second I laid eyes on yuh, that yuh're the girl I been waitin' for all my life," says Johnny, soft and pleadin'-like. "Won't yuh quit this outfit and marry me, Ruth? I got a li'l ranch back in the Piney Hills that'll get bigger and bigger as the years go by. I'll put in the rest of my life makin' yuh happy."

THAT li'l gal starts that honey-rich voice of hers runnin' and, old as I am, I kin see exactly why Johnny Longo feels like he does.

"But Johnny," she says, "you've only known me about an hour. Why, you don't even know me at all, for that matter."

"I've knowed yuh all my life," insists Johnny, plumb sturdy about it. "I jest met you an hour ago, but I've knowed yuh forever. Yuh ain't likin' that Rattlesnake jigger, are yuh?"

"I hate him!" She says it quick and fierce-like. "I hate him. He's mean and stingy and crooked. He's mean to me, he's mean to my father."

"Then why do yuh stick along with his show?" Johnny wants to know.

"Because Dad is old and tired and not well," she answers, tears in her li'l sweet voice. "I got to take care of Dad, and a job is a job these days."

"We'll take yore pa out to the ranch with us where all he'll have to do is set in the sun and feast his eyes on green grass and fat cattle and timbered hills," says Johnny. "He'll never have to hold knives and run chores and take mean lip from a jigger like Rattlesnake as long as he lives. Yuh better say yes, baby—that yuh'll marry me. Then we'll all be happy, you and me and yore Pa."

"Oh, Johnny, you tempt me, you tempt me," she chokes. "Only I couldn't bear it if you didn't truly love me."

"I'm goin' to kiss yuh, honey," says Johnny. "Then yuh'll know I love yuh."

It takes those two cute kids a full minute to git untangled. Then that li'l gal says, her voice all liltin' and light, like a meadow-lark singin':

"It's true, Johnny darling—it's true. You do love me and I love you and I don't know how it happened—but it's true. But I'm afraid to tell Rattlesnake I'm leaving. He'll be furious. And when he's furious he's awful mean."

"You leave Rattlesnake to me," says Johnny, grim-like. "You go right along with the show tonight like nothin' has happened. But get word to yore pa and when things close up I'll be here with a buckboard. Then I'll tell Rattlesnake off an' we'll pull out."

They's another clinch, then the li'l girl slips through a fold in the tent and Johnny Longo heads out the other way, steppin' high and wide like he'd just inherited the whole world. Me, I backs up and sneaks away, feelin' like I'd just seen a couple of song birds makin' love in the starlight. Yuh know, gents, they's time when I think that I, Ike Ferris, has got the soul of a poet.

Well, sirs, I see a argument goin' on over at the shootin' gallery. It's Cattace Collins and he's got one of them li'l 22

rifles and he's spangin' away tryin' to knock down them li'l travelin' ducks and not doin' a lick of good at it. "High Pockets" Magee and "Tin Ear" Tinega are watchin' him and joshin' him plenty, which Catface don't like at all, him considerin' himself plenty shucks with any old kind of a gun at any old kind of shootin'.

"I'm tellin' yuh," bawls Catface, "that these here cussed li'l guns don't shoot straight! They ain't got enough powder in 'em to hold true."

"Ain't the guns, Catface," jeers High Pockets. "It's you. Try her again, and I got a dollar that says yuh can't hit five out of ten of them ducks."

Catface cusses, slaps down a dollar, grabs one of them guns and starts shootin' again. High Pockets wins. Catface gets only one out of ten. High Pockets picks up Catface's dollar.

"I kin stand this all night if you kin, Catface," he says.

"My bet this time, High Pockets," Tin Ear Tinega says. "I want some of that easy money. Here's my dollar, Catface. Fly to it. I'm bettin' yuh can't get two out of ten this trip."

Catface stands dead still for a second or two. Then he lays down twenty dollars.

"That says," he growls, slow and cold-like, "that this time I git six out of six. Put up or shut up!"

Tin Ear and High Pockets ain't got twenty dollars between 'em, which the feller runnin' the shootin' gallery sees, so he covers Catface's twenty hisself and grins kind of smart-like.

"Anything I like to see is a man who ain't afraid to bet. And I'm a bettin' man myself. So yore twenty bucks is covered. Fly to it. Which one of these guns yuh want this trip?"

"None of 'em," snaps Catface. "I'll use my own."

Which he does. He hauls out that big old Colt gun of his and lets drive. The roar of that old .45 tore the night wide open. Now them li'l duck targets was made to take only pip squeak punishment from a li'l .22—they was never intended for anything else. So when that wallopin' two-fifty-five grain .45 Colt slug takes hold of one of them ducks, said duck just plumb disappears. Then Catface cuts down on the next one.

SIX times Catface lets drive, and six times a duck takes off for parts unknown. At least I figger six of 'em did, what with all the smoke and slam-bang. The feller that runs the shootin' gallery ain't in no position to count, havin' dived under the counter where he's holed up complete, yellin' bloody murder.

Them .45 slugs don't stop in the shootin' gallery. They tear plumb through the backstop and go sailin' off into the night, whinin' and hummin' like mad bumblebees.

"There, by glory," says Catface. "How did that suit yuh? Anybody else around here says I can't shoot?"

Seein' that there ain't, Catface gathers up the money. About then I grab him by the arm.

"Bosco Bates'll be here in a minute, Catface, and that'll mean the calaboose for yuh if yuh don't flit. Goin' my way?"

Catface gets the idea, pronto, so I and him fade out fast. I got a reason for wantin' Catface along. Because I got things workin' in my head. But first, we got to find Puggy and Shoo-fly.

Which we does, finally. They're hunkered down in the dark up agin a wheel of one of these carnival wagons, close enough to the lights to watch what's goin' on, far enough away to keep from bein' seen. Shoo-fly is still plumb mournful, all bogged down in shame over knockin' hisself for a loop.

"What was all the shootin' about?" asked Puggy. "Somebody git sore and want his dime back because Minnie don't lift a cow with her teeth nohow, but just a measly li'l bald-faced calf?"

I explains about Catface, and Shoo-fly comes to life, slappin' his leg and laughin'.

"Wish't I'd had a good look at that, Catface."

"Come along an' I'll go do her again," says Catface.

"Yuh will not," I says, quick-like. "We got more important business on hand."

"What kind of business?" they all wants to know.

So I tells 'em and they gets all enthused and we set to layin' our plans, plumb careful-like, so there won't be no mixup. About then here comes ten-year-old "Bub" Jenkins, hoppin' and skippin' along under the nearest light. Shoo-fly calls to him, goes over and says somethin' to the

kid, after which Shoo-fly slips the lad a dollar. Bub grins and scatters off into the night.

"Yuh ain't sendin' that kid after likker, I hopes," says Puggy, stern-like. "That'd be agin the law, Shoo-fly."

"Keep yore shirt on," soothes Shoo-fly. "Bub's just runnin' me a li'l harmless errand. I ain't even thinkin' of likker."

Well, the night runs along and folks begin driftin' back up town and things quiet down. The band quits playin' and in the home-bound crowd driftin' past I hear somebody say that the bass drum feller had lost his over-sized drumstick.

The different tents begin to close up for the night and I see it's about time. So I lead the way and the rest of the boys foller me, though at the last minute here comes Bub Jenkins runnin' and Shoo-fly goes to meet him an' I see Bub give Shoo-fly somethin'.

The place I take the boys to, steppin' real soft and easy, is around to the back of Rattlesnake Rollins' tent. There's a buckboard and team waitin' there an' inside the tent we can hear some pretty heated talk. We recognize Johnny Longo's voice.

"It ain't what yuh like or don't like, Rattlesnake," he is sayin'. "It's just what is. Which is that I'm takin' Ruth an' her pa with me, right here and now. Ruth and me are goin' to git married and her pa is goin' to live with us out at my ranch. Now, if yuh was a right gent, yuh'd wish us luck and quit yore yappin'. Yuh might as well, for that's the way it's goin' to be."

"That's what you thinks," snarls back Rattlesnake, and I never heard a hombre with a meaner voice. "This old fool and the girl are stayin' right here and doin' what I tell 'em to do. And you're lightin' a shuck out of here and stayin' out. Because if yuh don't, I'll chuck a knife plumb through yuh."

Then we hears that li'l girl pleadin' with Johnny, all soft tears and full of hopelessness.

"I told you it would be this way, Johnny. Please don't argue with him, or he'll throw that knife, and you know how deadly he is. Oh, Johnny, I been dreaming about that ranch—and you and me and Dad!"

She ends up with a soft li'l wail that does things to I and Puggy and Shoo-fly and Catface. It's Catface who explodes first. He don't try and find the back entrance to that tent. He just busts right through the canvas like it was old rag. And he has his gun out.

"Anybody tries to throw a knife in here gits his giblets shot out!" snarls Catface. "I'm lookin' at you in particular, Mr. Rattlesnake."

I AND Puggy and Shoo-fly, we barge right in behind Catface, and for a couple seconds that tent is so surprised there ain't a sound made by anybody. Then Johnny Longo speaks up, kinda mad-like.

"What's the big idee, Ike?" he demands of me.

"The idee, Johnny," I answers, "is that me and the rest of the boys aim to see that you and that cute li'l gal git off to a good start in life. Now you just gather up her and her daddy and light a shuck. Me and the other boys'll take care of old Rattlesnake yonder."

It takes a couple seconds to register, then Johnny grins from ear to ear.

"Now that's what I call white. You boys'll have to ride out and visit Ruth and her pa and me. The old welcome mat will shore be on the step for yuh."

While we're talkin' it's Shoo-fly who's sidlin' around to reachin' distance of old Rattlesnake, who don't take no notice of Shoo-fly, even if he has got one hand hid behind his back, because Shoo-fly is so dried up and scrawny-like.

Now old Rattlesnake spits out, "Yuh can't git away with it. Yuh can't bust up my show this way. I'll raise the roof! I'll—"

"That's what you think," cuts in Shoo-fly, steppin' in fast and quick.

Next thing I know there's a sort of muffled *tonk* and there's old Rattlesnake.

Shoo-fly, Puggy and Ike investigate a mining claim in THE CURSE OF GOLD, another uproarious Cactus City yarn by L. P. Holmes—coming next issue!

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flat on his back and out cold. Whilst Shoo-fly, he's grinnin' and wigglin' that bass drum feller's li'l round-headed club in his hand.

"Slickest li'l layer-outer I ever got my paws on," chirrups Shoo-fly.

So now I know what kind of monkey business Shoo-fly had put young Bub Jenkins up to. Bub had swiped that oversized drumstick for Shoo-fly.

Well, there we were, with old Rattlesnake down and out and cold as a codfish, and the trail plumb open for Johnny Longo and the li'l gal with the honey voice and her pore old tired pappy. Then I think of somethin'.

"Li'l honey gal," I says, "does old Rattlesnake owe you and yore pa any back wages? Somehow I just got a feelin' he's the sort who would allus owe back wages to them who've worked for him. How about it?"

It's the old feller who speaks up. "Yuh're right, cowboy," he says. "Rattlesnake does owe us back wages. For myself I don't care. But I don't like to see my li'l gal get cheated by a tinhorn like Rattlesnake. He owes us right around a hundred and fifty dollars."

"Shoo-fly," I says, "take a look."

Shoo-fly does, comin' out of old Rattlesnake's pocket with a wad of money that'd choke a durn side bigger cow than Minnie the Monster lifts with her teeth. Shoo-fly peels off a hundred and fifty smackers. "I'm plumb shore," he says, "once old Rattlesnake gits a chance to think things over, he'd want to buy a real nice weddin' present for the li'l gal with the honey voice. So—"

Shoo-fly peels off another hundred an' fifty and stuffs the rest back into Rattlesnake's pocket. He hands what he's took to the old feller, Ruth's pappy.

"Now," says Shoo-fly, "I guess we can all dust out of here."

Which he does, helpin' Johnny Longo get his future wife's luggage into the buckboard. I and Puggy and Shoo-fly and Catface, we're feelin' plenty good about this. Just before Johnny Longo and his new family-to-be pulls out, we feel better yet. For, dang me for a sheepherder, if that li'l honey gal don't make the rounds and kiss every one of us, thankin' us sweet as violets, for helpin' her and Johnny out. Yes sir, she kissed us, and left us feelin' like we was walkin' upside down on clouds.

WE listens to the buckboard rattle off into the night. Then Catface Collins gives a big sigh.

"She kissed me," he mumbles, dreamy-like. "That li'l honey bee kissed old Catface, she did. Right here where the whiskers is the thinnest. Me, I ain't goin' tc wash my face for a month. I'm hangin' onto that kiss as long as I kin."

We all have similar sentiments, but I manage to keep my Number Twelves on the ground. "When old Rattlesnake wakes up and begins to beller, it might be a good idee was us fellers to be far away and layin' low. Let's flit."

Which we do.

INJUN HATE

(Concluded from page 67)

for a friend! When men have fought each other, and they fought an enemy side by side—understand? Let's have a hot meal. Issue of whisky for all. Then we'll saddle up and ride on to Sheridan City. I'll send a courier to Fort Wallace with a report for Captain Gregg."

"If I may make a suggestion, sir, let Citizen Jim Carroll carry the report. He'll be eager to hurry. He can tell my daughter, Faith, that I'm all right—and that I think Jim has learned not to judge a man too quickly, and to have proper respect for our armed forces."

Cheyenne Jim thanked Beals with a look. He could make things right with Faith. Sergeant Beals grinned. Jim began pealing off some of his clothes so a trooper could care for his wounded shoulder, and Lieutenant Blaney helped him as one man to another.

"Sir?" Jim said.

"Yes, Jim?"

"Once I refused to shake hands with you. I'm ashamed of it. I'd be glad to shake hands with you now, sir."

Blaney grinned at him, and their handclasp had the strength of firm friends in it.

MISPLACED CONFIDENCE

An Exciting True Story of the Arizona Rangers

by THOMAS E. WAY

BEING a member of the Arizona Rangers was a distinction MacDonald Robinson took very seriously. He didn't draw the line as to whom he arrested, as long as the culprit was outside the pale of the law.

In spite of his giant structure—he was six feet, six inches tall and stout as a grizzly bear—it was his brainwork that made Robinson an invaluable addition to the organization, although his size did help out on occasion.

For some time in the vicinity of Globe, where Robinson was stationed, a particularly active gang of cow-thieves had been plying their trade. The stealing had been done with such finesse that no one seemed to be able to put a finger on the perpetrators.

Trail Leads to Prominent Men

Robinson's investigation entailed much undercover work and the direction in which it led him surprised him as much as it did his superior officers. There could

be a mistake. He again started at the beginning and, step-by-step, built up his case once more.

Again his investigation led him to—a group of Globe's most respected and influential citizens!

Citizens thereabouts thought of these men as gamblers, followers of a highly respectable vocation at that time. Some of the "elite" of all Western towns were gamblers. Knowing this, Robinson kept his information discreetly to himself while awaiting outside help. After all, he knew he would have a hard time convincing residents of Globe that their "best" citizens were cow-thieves. They paid their bills promptly and conducted themselves in a manner above reproach. Robinson could hope for no help from the cow-thieves' fellow townsmen. He called in four other rangers and held a conference with them.

Meet at Ranchhouse

The headquarters of the rustler gang was a ranch near Globe. The rustlers came and went daily about their work of blotting brands and readying stolen cattle for the drive to market. The rangers watched the ranch for several days. The small fry didn't count, they wanted the leaders who had so successfully pulled the wool over the eyes of Globe residents.

Finally the vigil of the rangers was rewarded. The six "irreproachable" citizens rode up to the ranch buildings and went into the main building. So far as the rangers could determine, these six and the cook were the only ones present. Shortly, the men emerged from the building and went into the cook shack. All were heavily armed.

Giving the outlaws only enough time to sit down at the table, the rangers slipped up to the shack. Robinson's large foot descended on the door with such force that it was kicked clear off the hinges and into the middle of the room. Before the surprise of this sudden and noisy entrance had worn off, the rangers had the handcuffs on all the alarmed ringleaders and the cook, all of whom had thoughtlessly laid their guns in a corner when entering the building.

Robinson revealed enough information to the judge to have the men held. Their bail was set at $2,000 each. The businessmen of Globe turned out en masse to put up the bail, that their good neighbors might be, and were, released.

Newspaper Denounces Rangers

The Globe paper roundly denounced the rangers for persecuting six of their most desirable citizens.

"Who," said one man, "is this big fellow (Robinson) who is supposed to be a protector of his fellow man, but instead, he persecutes our citizens!"

Then came the day set for the trial. The defendants were missing and had been for several days. Rumor had it that they were across the International border, in Mexico.

The bondsmen made an abrupt about-face. They wanted their bail money back. Their tune had changed.

"Go get those skulking runaway cow thieves," they begged Robinson.

Robinson answered, "Go get 'em yourselves! I had 'em once, but you didn't like the idea."

Bondsmen Appeal to Governor

The bondsmen even went to Governor Murphy, requesting him to intercede with the rangers. The Governor called Robinson and his superior officer, Captain Mossman, to Phoenix and demanded an explanation.

"Yes, we know where the thieves are," Mossman answered to a query of the Governor, "but let those smart boys get back their own fugitives and bail money." He explained the case thoroughly to the Governor, who listened carefully, then heartily agreed with the rangers.

The rangers never tried to re-locate the cow thieves and the bail money was never returned to the bondsmen. Thereafter, when some prominent person of Globe was arrested, the businessmen did not stampede to have the honor of bailing him out.

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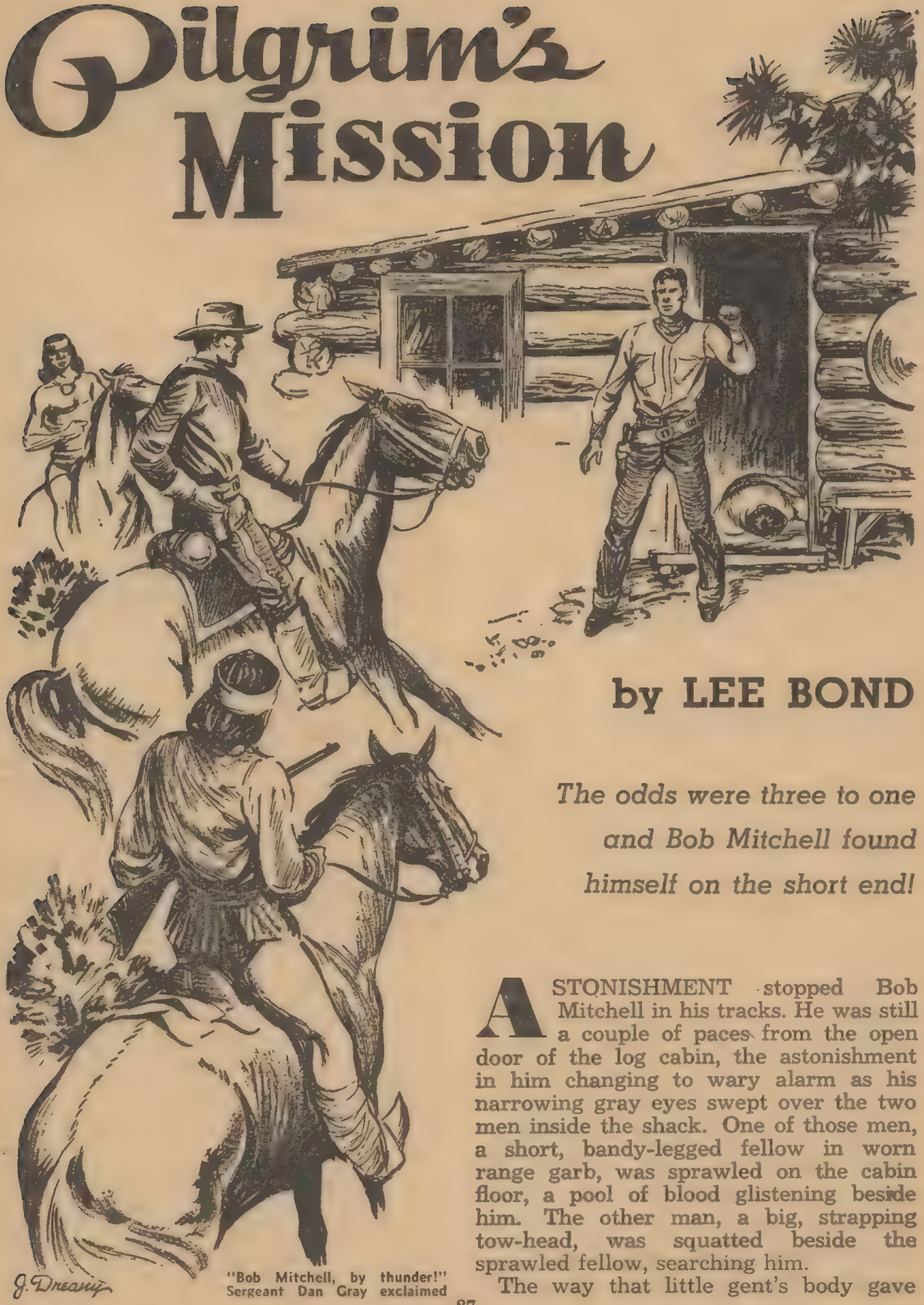
The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk at Their Best in TREASURE IN LEATHER, Next Issue's Novel by WALKER A. TOMPKINS!

Pilgrim's Mission



"Bob Mitchell, by thunder!" Sergeant Dan Gray exclaimed

by LEE BOND

The odds were three to one and Bob Mitchell found himself on the short end!

ASTONISHMENT stopped Bob Mitchell in his tracks. He was still a couple of paces from the open door of the log cabin, the astonishment in him changing to wary alarm as his narrowing gray eyes swept over the two men inside the shack. One of those men, a short, bandy-legged fellow in worn range garb, was sprawled on the cabin floor, a pool of blood glistening beside him. The other man, a big, strapping tow-head, was squatted beside the sprawled fellow, searching him.

The way that little gent's body gave

to the tow-head's rough touch, and the unmoving eyes in the white, lax face, told Bob Mitchell that the fellow was dead. And common sense told Bob that this was a good way for a stranger in Arizona to wind up in a batch of trouble.

Mitchell let his right hand swing down close to his six-shooter and stamped his right foot until the spur on his boot heel rang loudly.

The tow-head acted about the way Bob Mitchell expected. He whirled around and landed facing the door. He had tawny eyes that made Bob Mitchell think of a cougar's eyes. He had a sheet of tough white paper in his right hand, but he let it fall and grabbed for the Colt against his thigh.

"Hold it, mister!" Mitchell said coldly.

Mitchell's bone-handled .44 was in his hand, his right thumb crooked over the hammer as he slanted the muzzle up at the big tow-head. He watched anger replace the surprise and saw the tow-head's wide mouth kink in a grin, cold and impudent.

"Take it easy, you!" the tow-head snapped. "Maybe I acted a little impulsive. But nobody around here points his pistol at a Bishop and gets off to brag about it, so put up that gun."

"Bishop, Jones or Smith!" Bob Mitchell laughed flatly. "A name is just a name."

The tow-head's face got red, and the tawny eyes were turning ugly as he stared at Bob Mitchell's six-shooter.

"I'm Mark Bishop," he snapped the words out. "Sam Bishop is my daddy. This is Circle B graze you're on, stranger!"

"My name's Bob Mitchell," Bob said drily. "Who's the man on the floor?"

"This cabin is the Circle B's Trabuco Canyon line camp, Mitchell," Mark Bishop said. "The feller on the floor is Shorty Keever, a rider I signed a couple months back."

BOB MITCHELL looked the big tow-head over. He had on bench made boots, tailored tan pants, a green silk shirt, and an expensive Stetson. His belt was hand-tooled, as was the cutaway holster. His spurs were fancied up with silver inlay work. These expensive clothes and his arrogance made Mitchell believe the big tow-head was who he claimed to be.

Bob Mitchell had never heard of Sam or Mark Bishop, nor of their Circle B brand. But he had heard of Trabuco Canyon, and this little log cabin. Unless there was something mighty wrong, this cabin was on land that belonged to him, Bob Mitchell.

"Trabuco Canyon?" Bob asked slowly. "That's its name!"

"I said it was, didn't I?" Mark Bishop snapped. "Are you deef as well as dumb, cowboy?"

Bob Mitchell decided then that he'd better pull Mark Bishop's fangs, and moved fast.

"What in blazes!" Mark hollered.

Bob Mitchell had suddenly leaped into the cabin, hit him along the ribs with one hunched shoulder, then slid on past. Mark Bishop grabbed for his gun but found that his holster had been emptied and his fancy gun had been tossed to a bunk across the room.

"Just what in thunder are you up to, Mitchell?" Mark asked sharply.

"Mark, I'm a stranger in this country," Bob Mitchell said. "I spotted this log shack from the east rim, around sunup, and when I got here, I found you goin' through the pockets of a man who'd been killed from behind. Now if you were in my place, what would *you* do?"

"I'd mind my own business," Mark Bishop said grimly.

"That's what I am doin', Mark," Bob Mitchell said. "You and me are goin' to Mustang, eleven miles south of here, in case this is Trabuco Canyon. Mustang is the county seat, so there ought to be a sheriff around."

"Are you dumb enough to think I killed Shorty Keever?" Mark Bishop burst out.

Bob Mitchell squatted on his heels and snatched up the sheet of paper Mark had dropped earlier. Mark swore and started forward, but stopped when Bob Mitchell cocked the six-shooter he held in his right hand.

" 'To whom it may concern,' " Mitchell read aloud. " 'This will introduce Shorty Keever, who is employed by me as a range detective. Buck Lansing, Lazy L Ranch, Mustang, Arizona.' "

Mitchell pushed the paper into his shirt pocket.

"Brief but to the point," he droned. "Who's Buck Lansing, Mark?"

"None of your cussed business, Mitchell!" Mark lashed out.

Mitchell reached forth, snaked a Colt out of a holster on Shorty Keever's right leg, and sniffed the barrel, then put the gun back into the holster. He got hold of the dead man, turned the body up to one side, then flashed a glance at the blood-soaked back.

"Keever took one slug smack between his shoulder blades," Bob said. "Mebbe he was tagged by a long range shot. His own pistol hasn't been fired recently. If Buck Lansing is a private range detective, Mark, this could turn into somethin' pretty hard to explain."

"I've got nothin' to say, Mitchell, until we get into town and see Sheriff Jim Wayne," Mark retorted.

Bob Mitchell stood up, lowered the hammer of his six-shooter, but kept the gun in his hand.

"Let's hunt up this Sheriff Jim Wayne, Mark," he said. "I don't accuse you of a blamed thing—"

The sudden crack of a gun drowned Bob Mitchell's voice. He felt the bullet sear across the top of his left shoulder like the touch of a hot iron. He dived forward and down, rolling as he hit the puncheons, bringing his six-shooter up towards the square, paneless window in the cabin's south wall.

HE HEARD Mark Bishop jump out of the front door, run around the cabin towards the back.

"What was the idea in beefin' that gent from behind, Dewey?" Mark Bishop's deep voice blared. "Or was it you throwed that bullet into him, Ed? Now get away from that winder, Porter, and let's pull out of here. That goes for you, too, Ed Wilkerson!"

"It looked like you was in a tight, Mark," a gruff, low voice complained. "So Dewey shot at the stranger."

"Rattle your hocks, both of you!" Mark Bishop said nervously. "Shorty Keever is in there, with a slug 'tween his shoulder blades and now I reckon there's two corpses in that cabin. We're headin' for town, to tell Sheriff Jim Wayne about this."

"What we'd better do, Mark, is to get your gun and keep our mouths shut," the thin voice of Dewey Porter said. "Then this double killin' will seem like another attack on a lonely line camp by Geronimo and his war-whoops."

"Them cussed Apaches may have plugged Shorty, at that!" Mark Bishop said.

"Mebbe so," Dewey Porter droned. "But you can't prove it. Remember. Jim Wayne wears old Buck Lansing's collar, and Jim may jail you. Did you know that Shorty was a private range detective, hired by Old Man Lansing?"

"Yep, I found a paper in Shorty's boot," Mark Bishop said grimly. "But how'd you know about that, Dewey?"

"Ed and me heard rumors," Dewey Porter replied.

"Look at the way this stacks up now, Mark," Ed Wilkerson said. "Go into town and you'll end up in jail."

"But you two found Shorty," Mark Bishop said uneasily. "You come to the ranch and told me, and I rode over for a look-see. Jim Wayne can't make nothin' out of that, can he?"

"Wayne will claim Ed and me are lyin' to alibi you," Dewey Porter retorted. "The thing for us to do, Mark, is to let somebody else find them two bodies, and Geronimo will be blamed, sure as thunder."

"Dewey's right, Mark," Ed Wilkerson said. "If you go to town Buck Lansing would jump at this chance to railroad you to the gallows or the pen, for he's afraid you'll marry that daughter of his."

Bob Mitchell surmised Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson were whip-sawing big Mark Bishop into a snare that would leave him at their mercy for the rest of his life. Mitchell did not know what Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson were up to, and did not care a whole lot. He kept his cocked gun level at the window.

"Well, mebbe you boys are right," Mitchell heard Mark Bishop say. "Old Buck Lansing sure don't cotton to me. Wait here, and I'll go pick up my gun."

"We'll give you a hand, just in case that Mitchell feller ain't dead," Dewey Porter said quickly. "And while we're at it, Mark, we may as well lift that roll of foldin' money Shorty Keever won off Lafe Gotter in Mustang, last night."

"Somebody beat you to that roll, Porter!" Mark Bishop snapped. "Soon as I got here, I searched Shorty, and the dinero is gone. Stay put, while I go get my gun."

Bob Mitchell's sweaty palm tightened on his gun, and there was a cold flame in his alert eyes now. Dewey Porter or Ed Wilkerson would be almost certain to look in the window the minute Mark Bishop was out of their sight.

"Hold it, Mark!" Dewey Porter's voice rang out sharply. "Riders, off yonder against the east slope. And they're Apaches, by thunder!"

"Four or five of the murderin' sons!" Ed Wilkerson squawked. "They've seen us, and are spreadin' out. Rattle yore hocks, fellers! There may be more of them, ready to lift our hair."

Bob Mitchell heard the pound of boots as Mark Bishop and the two Circle B riders raced away. He jumped to the window and peered out. The three men were leaping toward a thicket twenty yards beyond the cabin. One of the men with Mark, he noted, was slim and thin, while the other was short, thick bodied.

MITCHELL ducked away from the window and ran to the front door. He heard the sounds of Mark Bishop and the other two Circle B men riding rapidly away from the thicket where they had left their horses. Mitchell's sharp gaze was on the half dozen riders, coming in across the valley at a stiff canter.

Five of those riders were Apaches, no question of that. But the sixth was a big, burly fellow in cavalry uniform, and suddenly Bob Mitchell was chuckling drily as he realized what had happened. He pushed his Colt into holster and stepped outside.

"Dan Gray!" Mitchell said as the six riders halted. "I see you still have your scalp and your three stripes."

"Bob Mitchell, by thunder!" Sergeant Dan Gray grinned and swung out of saddle.

Sergeant Gray was six-feet two, grizzled, browned and seasoned to hickory toughness by twenty years of service. After shaking hands with Bob Mitchell, he glanced back at the five Apaches.

"They're United States Army scouts," Gray told Mitchell.

Bob Mitchell inspected the Apaches, and suddenly guttural words in their own tongue poured from his lips. They nodded, faces immobile, beady eyes watching him.

"They see the dead man inside the cabin yonder, Dan," Mitchell told the sergeant. "I just told them all I know."

"Dead man?" the big sergeant said sharply. "We heard a shot and rode over to investigate, Bob. We also saw three riders ride down the valley, like the sight of us scared the wits out of 'em. What's the trouble here?"

Swiftly, Bob Mitchell told his story, revealing the plan of Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson to have the killing of Shorty Keever blamed on Geronimo and his bunch.

"They figure there'll be two corpses, in the cabin," Mitchell finished. "This is how close they came to getting me, Dan."

Mitchell peeled back shirt and undershirt from his left shoulder, displaying the oozing mark where Dewey Porter's slug had scraped the skin away. Sergeant Gray cursed angrily.

"And you're no longer connected with the Army, Bob," he said. "I heard Captain Crawford tellin' Lieutenant Maus, a few nights ago that you'd up and quit. So I'll have to waste time here, bustin' up the plan you say them two fellers, Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson, have hatched to make the death of this Keever party look like the work of Indians."

"When General Crook came here in 'Eighty-Two, I signed on with him as guide and interpreter," Bob Mitchell answered. "But three years was enough for me, Dan, so I bought a ranch, and this is part of it we're standin' on. You say you're with Captain Crawford?"

"I'm with Captain Crawford," the sergeant groaned. "We've got Geronimo on the run. He's headin' for Sonora, from the looks of things. We've got forty enlisted whites, and three hundred Apaches. I wish this hadn't come up. But I can't shut my eyes and ride on. If people believe the Apaches murdered that man in there, Captain Crawford will be blamed. So I'll have to report to him, which means a delay until we can straighten this out."

"Tell the Captain to keep right on Geronimo's heels," Bob Mitchell said quietly.

"This deal here is strictly civilian and I can handle it. This man was killed on my ranch. Tell him that I said I would see that the guilty party is punished by the law."

"Bob, if you do that, you'll sure win our thanks," the sergeant said.

Mitchell spoke rapidly to the Apaches in their own tongue, and again they nodded. Two of them dismounted, handing the reins of their mounts up to comrades.

"What did you tell Dutchy and Lonesome Boy to do?" Sergeant Gray asked.

DUTCHY, a stocky young Apache, and his older companion, Lonesome Boy, were breaking branches from a green bush that grew at the edge of the clearing, jabbering rapidly as they worked.

"I told Dutchy and Lonesome Boy to erase all sign except that of my horse," Bob Mitchell answered. "I want Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson and Mark Bishop to explain what happened to the Indians when they come back here with the crowd they're sure to fetch."

"Them three will be thinkin' they imagined the whole thing, for sure!" the sergeant said with a laugh.

Sergeant Gray mounted and rode off, the other three mounted Indians following him with the horses of Dutchy and Lonesome Boy, who used the branches they had broken off to sweep out all sign as they backed away up the canyon. Bob Mitchell watched until they had reached Sergeant Gray and the other Indians. They remounted, still holding the crude brooms, which would be dropped a long distance away. The sergeant and Dutchy waved, then they went riding back up the rocky slope.

Bob Mitchell went to his big bay gelding, Cherokee, and stepped up into the saddle. He rode past the cabin, grinning faintly as he saw that now only his own mount's hoof prints showed in the sandy soil. He headed down Trabuco Canyon at a canter, following a trail that showed considerable use.

When Bob Mitchell rode into the north end of Mustang's main street, he was not surprised to find the town boiling with activity. Most the people there were women and children, as almost every man in Mustang had gone galloping out to help hunt the Indians Mark Bishop and his two Circle B punchers had reported seeing.

Bob Mitchell rode down the street to the gnawed hitching rail before the court house, tied his horse, and stepped across the boardwalk, aware that the few men left in town were eyeing him sharply.

Mitchell spent almost an hour in the court house. When he came out, he remounted Cherokee, rode back to a low-roofed building he had noticed on the way in, swung down, and walked under a weathered sign that said HOTEL. He crossed the tiny lobby to a rickety desk, where a spike-nosed youth with mouse-colored hair stood regarding him. The boy offered a battered register, which Mitchell signed.

"Is there a bath in this hotel?" Mitchell asked.

The clerk snorted and let his lips curl back from his buck teeth.

"Yep," he whinnied. "It's at the end of the hall, marked b-a-t-h."

Mitchell surveyed him coldly. "Better pull in your neck, clerk, before someone steps on it."

Mitchell turned away, moving along the hall until he found Number 7, the room assigned to him. He opened his warbag, dug out clean but wrinkled clothing, bathed in a tin bathtub in the little room at the far end of the hall, and returned to his room to shave. Later, feeling considerably refreshed, he closed the door to his room and strode along the hallway and into the little lobby. He glanced only briefly towards the skinny clerk who cleared his throat nervously.

"I hope you found everything to your likin', Mr. Mitchell," the clerk said pleasantly. "Hope you didn't take my little joke wrong—"

"That will do, Albert." a cool feminine voice cut in quickly.

Mitchell turned and doffed his Stetson as a girl came across the little lobby. She was garbed in a fringed buckskin riding skirt, bench-made boots, and a beaded buckskin vest, over a crimson blouse that went well with her dark, curly hair and clear dark eyes.

"Mr. Robert Mitchell?" she asked, stopping before him.

"I'm Bob Mitchell, yes," he admitted, noting repressed tension and uneasiness

behind her poise.

"I understand that you registered a Rocking M brand at the court house a while ago, Mr. Mitchell, as well as a deed to a Trabuco Canyon Ranch that formerly belonged to Stoke Walker," she said. "You purchased that ranch from Dyke Benge, a Santa Fe attorney?"

BOB MITCHELL felt a prickling of annoyance as, from the tail of his eye, he saw the spike-nosed clerk leaning over the counter, watching and listening attentively.

"I purchased the place from Mr. Benge, Miss," Mitchell said quietly. "I registered the deeds at the court house."

The girl smiled and held out her slim hand, which Bob Mitchell gripped briefly.

"Welcome, neighbor!" she said. "I'm Vera Lansing. My father is Buck Lansing, and our Lazy L range joins your Rocking M just back of the rimrocks along the west side of Trabuco."

But despite the sincerity of her welcome, the tension had not gone out of Vera Lansing, Bob Mitchell noted. He smiled and expressed his pleasure at having a friendly neighbor, then waited, seeing the uneasiness shine in her eyes. Now the skinny clerk butted in.

"That fool, Stoke Walker, got so scairt of the Apaches that he sneaked off," the clerk said explosively. "Sold his ranch to that foxy old lawyer, Dyke Benge, up at Santa Fe, instead of givin' local people a chance to—"

"Albert Freel, that will be enough out of you!" Vera Lansing said spiritedly. "The attorney, Mr. Benge, and Stoke Walker were good friends, so there's nothing at all strange in Walker having sold his place to Mr. Benge. Please mind your own business!"

The girl turned her attention back to Bob Mitchell when the clerk subsided. But it was obvious that her tension had been heightened.

"Mr. Mitchell, I heard Geronimo and his warriors raided your log line-cabin in Trabuco Canyon," she said. "Did you know that?"

"I was at the line camp this morning, Miss Lansing," Mitchell said. "I met a big handsome buckaroo out there who said his name was Mark Bishop. With him were a couple of other men—Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson—two riders working on the Circle B ranch, which belong to Sam Bishop, Mark's father."

"But there were no Indians?" Vera Lansing asked dazedly. "Geronimo and his men were not at that cabin?"

"Geronimo and his war-whoops are probably across the Line, in Sonora, Miss Lansing." Bob Mitchell kept the smile on his lips. "Captain Crawford, of General Crooks command, is out there along the east slopes of Trabuco Canyon, with three hundred Apache scouts, and forty enlisted white soldiers. There were no hostile Apaches around that log cabin this morning."

"What kind of a windy are you offerin' us, Mitchell?" Albert Freel cried shrilly. "Do you think Vera and me will take your word against that of Mark Bishop?"

"Mark says he started for that line camp with Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson, this morning, to see if Shorty Keever, who has been stationed there, needed provisions," Vera Lansing said nervously. "Mark and his two men heard guns firing, and the yells of raiding Apaches. Mark said he rode close enough to see Shorty Keever, and some cowboy he did not know, at bay in the cabin. Mark and his companions raced back to town to get aid, and spread the alarm of the Apache raid."

"Ha!" Albert Freel yelped. "If you was out at that cabin, Mitchell, how come you don't know nothin' about that Apaches raid?"

"I know nothing about it because there was no such raid," Mitchell said calmly. "Mark Bishop and his two riders lied."

"Just wait until I tell Mark what you said." Freel grinned crookedly.

"Did you see Mark at the log cabin this morning, Mr. Mitchell?" Vera Lansing asked in a hushed voice.

"Mark and I had quite a visit." Mitchell smiled faintly. "As a matter of fact, we were on the point of starting for town together when Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson showed up. The three of them left me there, and headed for town. I followed a little later."

"Frankly, Mr. Mitchell, I scarcely know what to think about this," the puzzled girl said. "I have the feeling that you haven't told all you could tell. Well, ride

over to the Lazy L, when you have the time. My mother and father will be glad to know our new neighbor."

SHE nodded to Mitchell, then walked from the lobby and out into the bright, hard sunlight of the street. Mitchell watched her until she disappeared around a corner. The hotel clerk's shrill voice made him turn around.

"Uh-huh, she's dog-goned cute," Albert Freel whinnied. "But don't get notions, or you'll earn another whuppin'."

"What do you mean, Freel?" Mitchell asked, staring at the clerk.

"You've got one whuppin' comin' for sayin' that Mark Bishop and them other two Circle B fellers lied about them Apaches," Freel said. "Go shinin' up to Vera, and you'll git another whuppin'. Sheriff Jim Wayne and Mark Bishop have got their caps set for her. Go to prancin' around that girl, Mitchell, and the Sheriff and Mark will both jump plumb all over you."

"Thanks for the warning, Albert," Mitchell said drily, and strode out to the boardwalk.

On the way into town, Mitchell had seen a livery stable. Now he untied Cherokee and rode the bay down a little side street to the big barn. There he turned the bay over to a grizzled little man, paying in advance for the care of his horse, and gave his name.

"So you're Bob Mitchell!" the stable man said in friendly tones. "I hear you just bought Stoke Walker's place up Trabuco Canyon from Dyke Benge. I've known Benge for years. He's a mighty fine feller.

"He is that," Mitchell said warmly. "Dyke Benge has been my friend and adviser, since I was orphaned at fifteen. Six months ago I told the old gentleman that I had collected a stake, and asked him to watch out for a good ranch. He bought this Trabuco Canyon ranch for me from Stoke Walker."

"Well, there's somethin' in my office that belonged to Stoke Walker, Mitchell, so I reckon you own it now," the stable man said. "Come along, and see whether you want the fool thing."

Bob Mitchell frowned. He did not like the glib-tongued barn man, nor the fellow's fawning manner. Nevertheless he followed him into the office. "It's over there, on my desk," the livery man said. "Take a look at them papers, Mitchell."

Bob Mitchell heard the livery man enter the ill-smelling office and close the door. He walked over to a cluttered desk, and frowned as he looked down at a messy pile of scraps of paper. Then some instinct warned him of danger and he turned.

The stubby barn man was leaning against the closed door, looking scared. On either side of him, their backs to the wall, were Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson.

"Well, now!" Mitchell said slowly, and felt his nerves loosen as the first shock passed.

"Don't touch your gun!" warned the lantern-jawed man on the tricky barn owner's right.

He was Dewey Porter; Bob Mitchell knew his voice. Porter was slim. His eyes were the dull, unwinking, like those of a rattlesnake. Mitchell's glance went to the double-barreled, ring-trigger derringer in Dewey Porter's right hand.

It was a .41 caliber pistol, deadly at close range. The over-under barrels were centered on Mitchell's abdomen, yet he did not think of that. He was thinking that the .41's big slug would kill a man almost instantly, but that it would rarely go all the way through. He remembered Shorty Keever's body out there at the log cabin. There had been no wound in front.

Mitchell shifted his glance. Ed Wilkerson's blocky hand was curled around the butt of a six-shooter he had not drawn and his stocky body was relaxed. Only sullenness showed on his face.

"You put us in a fix, Mitchell." Wilkerson had a husky voice. "Dewey and me want to know things."

"Dewey, you and Ed promised there'd be no rough stuff if I tolled this feller in here," the barn man quavered, his voice thin with strain.

"Run along, Hayden!" Dewey Porter snapped. "Get yourself an alibi in some bar." He did not look at the stable man. He kept his rattlesnake eyes on Mitchell.

"But you boys promised me—" Hayden whined.

Ed Wilkerson spoke then. "Get out of here, Cole!" he said.

Cole Hayden shot one horrified glance

at Bob Mitchell, then opened the door, and slid outside. When the door slammed behind him, Dewey Porter grinned at Bob Mitchell, and that grin was an ugly thing to see.

"Mister, when Mark and Ed and me got back to that log cabin with the fellers we'd gathered up, we sure did land in hot water," he said. "There was only Shorty Keever's carcass and nary a hoss track except from your bay. You've got some explainin' to do."

"Mark Bishop is only a swaggerin' kid," Bob Mitchell answered. "We'll forget him. But you boys are old hands. Did Hayden tell you that I own the ranch that used to belong to Stoke Walker?"

Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson exchanged startled glances.

"Hayden said you owned the Trabuco Canyon ranch," Dewey Porter admitted. "But what do you mean by Ed and me bein' old hands, Mitchell?"

"You boys are graduates in the art of pickin' up cattle that aren't watched too close." Mitchell chuckled drily. You drifted in here, signed on with that dumb Mark Bishop, and started snippin' off little bunches from old Buck Lansing's Lazy L herds. You've no doubt choused off a few Circle B critters, too."

"You think we're rustlers, eh?" Ed Wilkerson asked. "Well, what else."

"You boys got too greedy," Mitchell went on. "Buck Lansing hired Shorty Keever as a private range detective, and Shorty signed on the Circle B, showin' that he suspected somebody on Bishop's spread of throwin' a wide loop. After you beefed Shorty this mornin', you two invented that tale of Apaches raidin' the cabin without stoppin' to think that the sheriff would wonder why there were no bullet holes in the logs. So—"

"Hold on, Mitchell!" Dewey Porter cut in sharply. "You think Ed and me shot Shorty Keever?"

Mitchell grinned coldly. "Porter, I'll give you odds of fifty to one that the bullet they'll dig out of Shorty Keever's body will be a .41 caliber derringer slug."

Dewey Porter's hand jerked as if the derringer in his palm had turned red-hot. He looked down at the gun, an oath spewing from his lips. When he looked up again, there was a burning worry in his hard eyes.

"How much gabbin' have you done around town, Mitchell?" he asked.

"I dropped a little story to the effect that I had been out at that cabin, talked with Mark Bishop, and that you two had ridden off with Mark," Bob Mitchell said. "I didn't mention Shorty Keever's name to anybody, and didn't let on that I'm packin' a bullet burn on top of my shoulder, where the slug you meant for my back took off a little skin. I just made liars out of you and Wilkerson and Mark Bishop."

"I ought to send a slug through your middle for that, Mitchell!" Ed Wilkerson said coldly.

"Why?" Mitchell countered. "Isn't gettin' off with bein' rawhided for spinnin' a tall tale about Apaches raidin' that line camp, a lot better than a hang-rope?"

Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson, scared and angry, swapped glances again.

"I don't like the setup, Dewey." Ed Wilkerson's voice sounded worried.

"Me neither," Porter grunted. "Maybe this galoot ain't done nothin' worse than make fools out of us."

"Listen, Dewey!" Wilkerson burst out. "Hear all them hosses comin'? That'll be Jim Wayne and them other fellers. We've got to get out of here fast."

"Why don't you boys duck out of here, then meet me back of the corral, soon as it's dark tonight?" Bob Mitchell said smoothly. "I've got a idea that we can work somethin' out."

"I've got an idea too, Mitchell!" Dewey Porter said coldly. "We ain't leavin' here without you. Lift them hands. I want your gun. You're goin' with us!"

"Now you're talkin', Dewey!" Ed Wilkerson growled.

OBEDIENTLY Mitchell raised his hands shoulder high as Dewey Porter came sliding in towards him. Mitchell waited until he saw Porter had come in close and had extended his left hand. Then Mitchell's left boot smashed solidly against Dewey Porter's right wrist, sending the derringer spinning through the air. At the same second he caught Porter's shirt front, and brought him violently forward, spinning him around.

"Drill him, Ed!" Dewey Porter gasped.

Porter's voice was drowned in the thunderous roar of Ed Wilkerson's .45 Colt.

The muzzle had been slanted downward and Mitchell shifted his feet barely in time, knowing that Wilkerson was trying to smash one of his ankles with a slug. He pulled his own Colt, batted Dewey Porter to the floor, then swung the barrel around and thumbed two quick shots at Ed Wilkerson's hulking figure. Wilkerson skidded down along the wall, the smoking gun spilling from his hand.

A six-shooter went off almost at Bob Mitchell's feet, and he felt as if a horse had kicked him in the ribs. He crashed back against the paper littered desk, and another slug ripped past his face as he tumbled down to the floor. He was breathless, numbed, and dazed as he lifted the Colt that seemed so amazingly heavy. The gun out there in front of him was still spitting red-tipped thunder, and he felt grit and splinters whip into his face beside his head. He eared back the hammer of his own gun and let it fall at Dewey Porter who was scuttling backwards behind that spitting gun.

Porter screamed and there were no more blazing bursts of fire from his gun. Mitchell lay back, pain rippling through his right side in waves, now that the numbness of shock was passing. He was hazily aware of pounding feet and loud voices. He tried to get up but everything got to whirling around, and he pitched over on his face, unconscious . . .

Bob Mitchell blinked at the golden lamplight about him. When he attempted to sit up, pain shot through his right side and a gnarled hand eased him quickly down on the bed. He saw that he was in his room at the hotel, and that a wiry little man with snow-white hair and a drooping, white mustache was leaning over him, watching him keenly.

"Got your wits about you, Mitchell?" the old man asked.

"Sure," Bob said hollowly.

"I'm Buck Lansing, son," the old man said, smiling. "Don't bounce around none in that bed, now, for you have a busted rib and a bad flesh wound. Doc Tanner says you'll be all right pretty soon. Devil of a way to meet up with you, but anyhow, howdy, neighbor!"

Bob Mitchell feebly told old Buck Lansing that he was glad to know him.

"What happened, Mr. Lansing?" he asked. "The last I remember, I was havin' a set-to with Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson, down at the livery barn."

"Dewey Porter is dead," the white-haired cowman said. "Ed Wilkerson admitted that Dewey Porter murdered Shorty Keever because Shorty was onto their rustling, and said him and Porter split money they found on Shorty's body. But me and a few others had most of that figgered out by the time we got to town today, anyhow."

"You savvied that there had been no Apache raid on that line cabin of mine, eh?" Mitchell asked.

"Of course," the little cowman nodded. "And on top of that, Mark Bishop got scared when Dewey Porter and Ed Wilkerson sneaked away from the rest of us and when he confessed to his part in that crazy mess, blamed if Jim Wayne didn't arrest him."

"Mark's not a thief, and I'd bet on it," Mitchell said quickly.

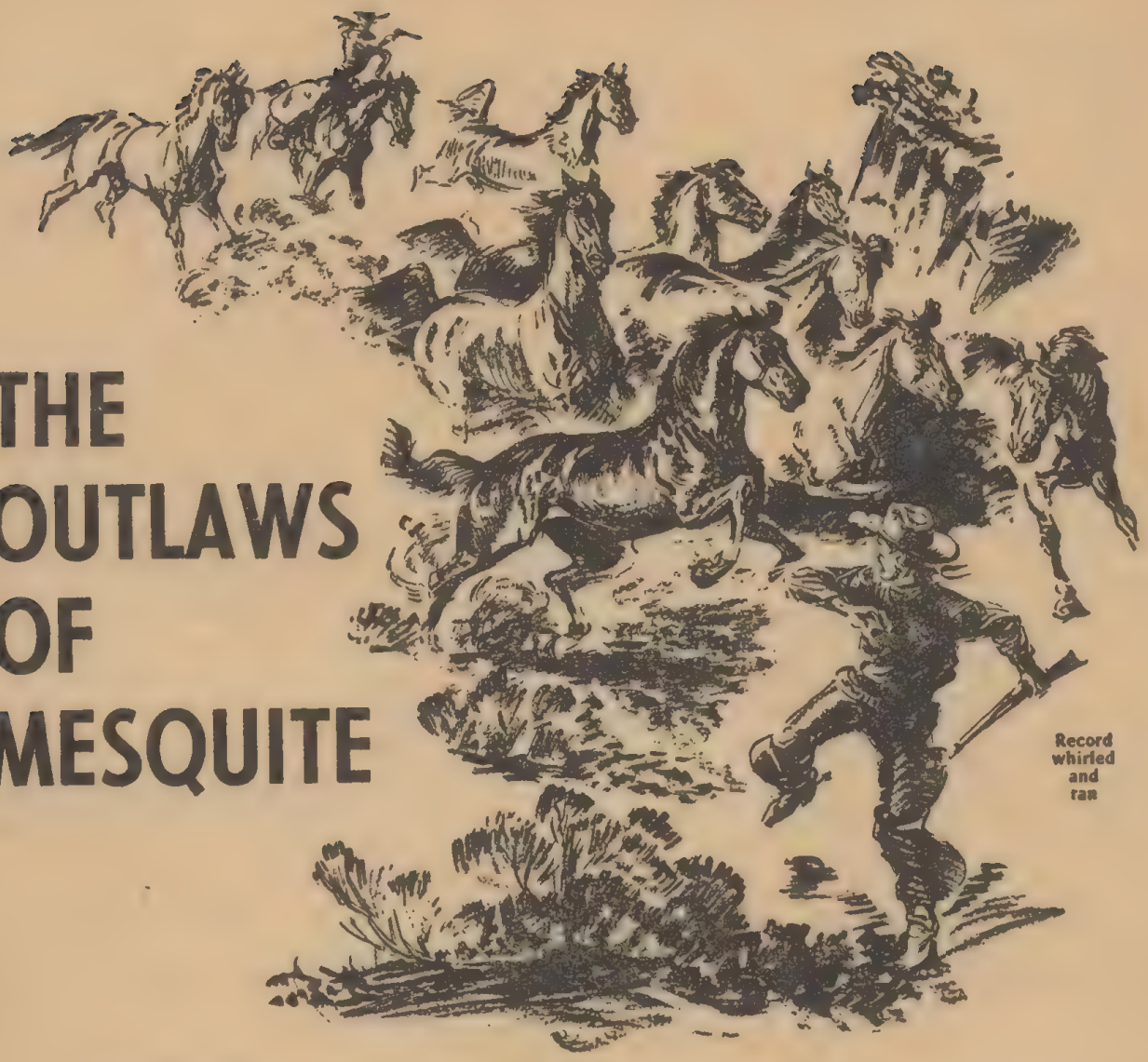
"That kid is nothin' but a big-mouth and a pest!" Buck Lansing snorted. "Maybe a night in jail will teach the knot-head somethin'. Right now I better go get that young'un of mine, and let her know you're awake. A big army sergeant by the name of Dan Gray rode into town a while ago, askin' about you. Vera got hold of him, and liked to talked the sergeant to death. She knows your pedigree from 'way back, son, and the way she acts there's nothin' in your past to make you squirm. The sergeant said he'd have to push on, but wanted me to say thanks to you for completin' your mission, whatever that meant. I'll tell Vera that you've come out of it, and she'll be along, pronto."

The little old cowman went out the door, his boot heels thumping the boards along the hall in diminishing sounds. Bob Mitchell stared up at the ceiling without seeing it, a faint smile on his lips.

Then there was a light, quick step at his door, and Bob Mitchell's smile got broader, and he forgot about Geronimo and his hostile Indians.

Vera Lansing was there in the room, smiling at him. There was something gentle and yet almost shy in her eyes as she advanced. Looking up at her, Bob Mitchell guessed he would not miss the reckless, rollicking life of an army scout and interpreter too poignantly for long.

THE OUTLAWS OF MESQUITE



Record whirled and ran

Surrounded by desperadoes, Milt Cogar has just one slender chance of escape — a chance that requires all his courage!

by JIM MAYO

MILT COGAR was at the corral catching up the paint when Thacker walked down from the store. "You'd better get shet of this town, boy. They are fixin' to make trouble for you."

Milt turned around and looked at the big, clumsy man, his shirt stuffed into his trousers and held there by a rope belt. Thacker never seemed to have a full beard and always seemed to need a shave. His watery blue eyes looked vague. He rolled his quid in his jaws and spat.

"It's what I'm tellin' you, son. You done me a favor or two."

"Why should they be after me?" Cogar demanded. He was a lean young man with a dark, leather like face. His eyes were almost black, and keen.

"Spencer wants your horses. You know that. He sets a sight of store by good horseflesh, and he's had a thorn in his side ever since you rode into the valley. Anyway, you're a stranger, and this coun-

try don't cotton to strangers."

Milt Cogar hitched his gun belts and stared at Thacker. "Thanks. I'll not forget it. But betwixt the two of us, this country has reason to be afraid of strangers."

Thacker's eyes shifted uneasily. "Don't you be sayin' that aloud. Not around here. And don't you tell nobody what I said."

Thacker drifted off down toward his shack, and Milt Cogar stood there, uncertainly. He was not ready to drift, nor did he like being pushed, but he had sensed the undercurrent of feeling against him.

Mesquite was a rustler town. It was a holdup man's town, and he was a wild horse wrangler and a drifter. He threw the saddle on the paint and cinched it down. All the while he was thinking of Jennie Lewis, for she was the reason he had stayed on at Mesquite.

Milt Cogar was no trouble hunting man. He knew that of himself and he told that to himself once more. In nearly thirty years of drifting, he had kept clear of most of the trouble that came his way. Not that he hadn't had his share, for times came when a man couldn't dodge fights. This could be that kind of time.

Dan Spencer was ramrodding the town. He was the big wheel. Milt had seen the big man's eyes trailing him down the dusty corner of road that did duty as Mesquite's main street. There were only four buildings on that street, and a dozen houses. Jennie lived in the house back under the cottonwoods with Joe and Mom Peters.

SPENCER wasn't only big and rough. He was slick. He was slicker than blue mud on a side hill, only he didn't look it. Milt was a top hand at reading sign, and he could read the tracks years left across a man's face. He knew what manner of a man Dan Spencer was, and what to expect from the others, from Record and Martinez.

It was a mean little place, this valley. The scattering of ugly, unpainted frame buildings, the hillsides covered with scrub pine and juniper, the trail a dusty pathway through the pine and huge, flat faced boulders. There was a waterhole, and it was that which had started the town. And somewhere back in the cliff and brush country there was a canyon where Spencer and his boys backed up their stolen cattle.

Thacker was right. He should throw a leg over his kak right now and light a shuck out of here. If he stayed there would be trouble, and he was no gunfighter like Spencer or Record, nor a knife in the belly killer like Martinez. He should light out of here right now, but there was Jennie Lewis.

Jennie was eighteen now, a slim, lovely girl with soft gray eyes and ash blonde hair. She looked like the wind could blow her away but there was quick, bubbling laughter in her, and sometimes a look in her eyes that touched something away down inside of a man.

She was a casualty of the trail. Cholera had wiped out her family, and Joe Peters had found her, ten years old and frightened, and carried her home. Only now she was big enough and old enough for Spencer to see, and what Dan Spencer wanted, he took.

Nobody in town would stop Spencer. There were twenty-seven people in Mesquite, but those who weren't outlaws were shy, frightened people who made themselves obscure and came and went as silently as possible, fearful of speaking lest Dan Spencer lay eyes upon them.

That was how it had been until Milt Cogar rode into town with his catch of wild horses, sixteen head of them, and all fine stock, and most of them broke to ride. Milt was going on through, but he stopped by the waterhole with his horses, and while they drank he talked with Jennie.

"You've beautiful horses," she said wistfully. "I never saw anything so beautiful, not even the horses that Spencer has."

"They are nice." Cogar was a man unused to the sound of his voice, for he lived much alone. "That's one of the reasons why I catch them. I like working with horses."

She was standing near one of them, and the black put out a friendly nose, and she touched it. The horse did not shy.

"You would never guess they had ever been wild," she said wonderingly. "They are so gentle."

"Most horses are nice folks, ma'am," he said. "They like people. You teach one he doesn't have to be afraid, and right

away he gets mighty curious and friendly. For the first few days you just keep them around, no sudden movements, no violence. Just keep a firm hand on them, and feed them well.

"Horses when frightened can't think, not even so much as people, but once they know a man, they'll trust him to take them any where at all."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "You must be a kind man," she said gently. "Most men around here break their horses rough."

He flushed and looked away, feeling the slow red on his face and neck and hating himself for being self conscious. "I don't know about that, ma'am."

Hurriedly, he tried to change the subject. "Your folks live here?"

A shadow touched her face. "No, they are dead, long ago. I live with Joe Peters over on the sidehill. He and Mom took me in when I was a child." Her eyes went to his. "You aren't staying here?"

"I was figuring on drifting through," he said, "down toward the canyon country. I got me a little place down there, and I figured to rest up for awhile."

"It must be nice to go wherever you want," she said slowly, shifting the heavy wooden bucket in her hands. "This is an awful place!"

THE sudden feeling in her voice shocked him. "Why don't you leave?"

"I can't. Dan Spencer wouldn't let me, not even if I found a way to get out."

"Spencer? What's he to you?" Milt Cogar pushed his black hat back on his head and looked at her, seeing the softness in her eyes, and the worry, too. Yet it was more than worry, it was fear.

"He runs Mesquite and everybody in it. He . . . wants me."

"Do you want him? You aim to marry him?"

She flushed anew. "I've not much to say about it here. If he wants me, there's nobody to stop him. As for the rest of it, he hasn't said anything about marrying."

Milt Cogar felt chill anger rising within him. "Who does this Spencer think he is?" he demanded. "Nobody can take a girl unless she wants to go! This country's free!"

"Not in Mesquite, it isn't! This is Dan Spencer's town, and nothing happens in it he don't like. You'd better keep him from seeing your horses, too. He'll want them."

"He'll trip himself up gettin' them!" Cogar said decisively. His eyes went to Jennie's face. "Ma'am, why don't you mount up and ride out of here? If you want to go, I'll see you get safe to the Ferry. Once across the river, you can head down toward Prescott or somewhere you'd be safe."

"Oh, if I only could—" Her voice died, and Milt looked up.

A burly, heavy shouldered man with two guns was standing across the waterhole.

"If you could what?" the burly man asked. Then his eyes shifted to Milt, and from him to his horses which he studied with a slow, appraising look, then back to Cogar. "Who are you?"

Milt looked at him with careful eyes. There was danger in this man, but he had faced danger before.

"I'm a man ridin' through," Milt said. "Who are you?"

Spencer stiffened. "Dan Spencer's the name, and I run this town."

Milt lifted his eyes insultingly toward the collection of miserable shacks. "Must keep you busy," he said.

"Not too busy but what I could teach you some manners!" Spencer's voice rang harshly. He walked around the waterhole, hands swinging at his sides. "Jennie, you go on home!"

Only an instant did the girl hesitate, apprehension for Cogar in her eyes. Then she began backing away.

Spencer stopped, a dozen feet from Milt, and dropped his hand to his gun butt —then the hand froze where it was, and Dan Spencer's eyes bulged. He was looking into the muzzle of a .44 Winchester carbine. "Unbuckle your belt, and be careful!" Milt warned.

Dan Spencer's face was gray, very slowly he moved his fingers to the belt and unbuckled it, letting the Colts fall. "Now take a step toward me," Cogar commanded.

The big man complied. Color was coming back into his face and with it the realization that Milt Cogar had shown him up in front of the girl. Yet there was little he could do. His guns were on the ground behind him now.

"Now, let me tell you something, Spen-

cer," Cogar spoke quietly, but coldly. "You let me alone. I'm passin' through Mesquite. I may decide to stay over a couple of days, but don't let that give you any ideas, because if you get tough with me, I'll kill you! Now pull your freight."

When Spencer was gone, Milt stooped and shucked the shells from Spencer's guns, then from the belt. Shoving the shells into his pocket—all but a few. He stood there by his horses and, taking out his knife, worked for a few minutes over those shells. Then he fed them back into the guns. When he was about to mount and ride on, he heard a low call from the brush. It was Jennie.

He mounted and rode over to where she waited, leaving his horses tied in groups of four.

"You'd better go quickly!" she warned. "He'll kill you! It isn't only him alone. He has other men. Two of them are John Record and Pablo Martinez. Both are killers and with him nearly all the time."

COGAR looked down at the girl. He was a tall, spare man with a quiet, desert man's face.

"This is no place for a girl. You want to leave?" he said.

Hope flashed into her eyes. "Oh, I'd love to! But I've nowhere to go, and even if I wanted to, Spencer wouldn't allow it. Mom has wanted Joe to smuggle me away, but he's afraid."

"Well, you get back to your house and get together whatever you want to take along, but not much of it. You fix us a mite of grub, too. Then you slip out of the house, come daybreak, and meet me by that white boulder I can see just below town. I'll take you out of here, and see you get safe to help. You ain't afraid of me?"

Jennie looked at him quickly. "No, I guess not. You look like an honest man. Also I'm remembering you treat your horses kind. I trust you. Anyway," she added, "there's nobody else."

He grinned. "That makes it simple. You be there, now. We may have to ride fast."

When Milt Cogar had his horses bedded down on the edge of Mesquite, he studied the place warily. There was a saloon, a general store, a blacksmith shop and an eating house. Leaving his carbine concealed near a clump of mesquite, he hitched his guns to an easier position and headed up the street. A heavy bodied man with a stubble of beard showed on the saloon stoop. Milt avoided the place, rightly guessing it would be Spencer's hangout, and walked to the restaurant and went in.

A fat man with freckles and a fringe of sandy hair around a bald spot was cooking over an iron range. He glanced up.

"Fix me some grub," Milt suggested. "I'm sure hongry."

Red nodded briefly and grabbing a big plate, ladled out a thick chunk of beef, a couple of scoops of beans, and some potatoes. Then he poured a cup of coffee from a battered coffee pot and picked up some sourdough bread.

Cogar ate in silence for awhile, then glanced up. "You one of Dan Spencer's outfit?"

Red stiffened. "I run my own shebang. If Spencer wants to eat, I feed him. That's all I have to do with him."

"I heard this was his town."

"It is. All but me." The door pushed open as he spoke, and Thacker came in. He sat down heavily on a chair across the table from Milt Cogar.

"Nice horses you got," he said tentatively.

Milt glanced up, taking in Thacker with a glance. "They'll do," he agreed.

"Don't need a hand, do you? Sixteen horses are a bunch for one man."

"My horses are gentle. I can handle them."

Thacker's face flushed a slow red, and he glanced toward the sandy haired cook. He said softly:

"I could use a mite of work now. I'm sort of short."

Milt Cogar could sense the big man's embarrassment and it stirred his quick generosity. "Might lend you a bit," he suggested, keeping his own voice low. "Would ten dollars help?"

Thacker's face glowed red, but there was surprise and gratitude in his eyes. "I ain't no hand to borry," he said, "and you ridin' through like you are," he spoke hesitantly. "I reckon I hadn't better."

Cogar pushed a gold piece across the table. "Take it, man, and welcome. I've been staked a couple of times with no chance to pay back, so forget about pay-

ing me. When you have it, stake some other hombre."

When Thacker had gone, Red turned around. "Heard that," he said, then jerked his head toward the way Thacker had gone. "He ain't much good, either, but he's got him a boy he fair worships. He'll buy grub for that kid with the money, you can bank on it."

It was later, by the corral, that Thacker had come to Cogar with his warning. It was unnecessary, for Milt knew what he was facing. He also knew he was going to ride out of that town with Jennie Lewis or there would be blood on the streets. Yet he was no fighting man unless pushed. He wanted to get her away without trouble, yet when he faced the facts, he knew that Spencer grated on his nerves, that the thought of the man ruling the helpless people of the town angered him.

Carefully, he looked over his horses, checking to see if any had injured feet, and stopping to talk and pet each one of them. They were fine stock, and would sell well, yet he never gentled a bunch like this without hating to part with them.

UP THE street he could see lights going on in the saloon. He felt better with the meal under his belt, and he inspected his gun again. Spencer, Record and Martinez, and half the town at least in cahoots with them. Nor could he expect any help. It was his game.

Milt backed up against a corral post and faced the town. He could watch from here. The horses liked to see him close. He dozed a little knowing trouble would come later, if at all. For awhile they would wait for him at the saloon, and that was a place he had no intention of going.

Darkness crawled over the hills and pushed patrols of shadow between the buildings and along the edge of the woods. More lights came on. Behind him a horse stamped and blew, and somewhere out on the desert, a blue quail called softly, inquiringly.

It was very quiet. A tin bucket rattled somewhere, and he could smell the oil on his guns. Once he got up and walked among his horses, talking softly to them. His eyes shifted toward the light in the cabin where Jennie lived.

It seemed strange, having a woman to think about. He was a lonely man, and like so many lonely men he knew how to value love, attention, and the nearness of someone. He remembered the dusty spun gold of her hair, and the slim figure under the faded dress. There was something fine about her, something that spoke of another world than the world of Mesquite, Dan Spencer, and his followers.

He grinned ruefully. After all, she was not his to think about. He had only offered to help her, and once she was safely away—well, who was he to expect interest from such a girl as that?

A door opened and closed, and he glanced toward the saloon, making out a dark figure on the porch. The pale blotch above it was the man's face, looking toward him. Yet the watcher could not see Milt, for the blackness of his body would merge with the blackness of the corral corner.

They were beginning to wonder if he was coming, and when. He sat perfectly still, keeping his ears ready for the slightest sound. He did not look directly at the figure, but near it, and he did not allow his gaze to become fixed. He must be wary and ready always.

Had it not been for the weariness of his horses he might have started with Jennie at night, but the horses needed rest, and tomorrow would be a hard, long day. Doubly hard if Spencer elected to pursue.

The man on the porch returned inside, and Milt Cogar arose and moved around to get the stiffness from his muscles. Suddenly, an idea came to him, and he turned toward the corral, staring within. His own horses were outside, but inside were a half dozen cow ponies used by Spencer and others. For an instant, Cogar considered, and then he got busy.

A sorrel with a white face had stayed close to the corral bars and several times he had patted it a little. Now he went inside and catching the halter, led it out and tied it near his own horses. By soft talk and easy movements, he succeeded in getting two more outside where he tied them in plain view of the saloon. Then he took the first four of his own horses, and walking them carefully, led them away down the trail.

When he was out of sight of the town, he tied them and returned. In four trips he had led all of his own horses to the same place. Then he untied the first four.

knowing they would stay together. After that he walked back and saddled his gray gelding. The paint he had caught earlier was already saddled and waiting. He had bought the extra saddle from a busted cowhand down Las Vegas way, but now it was to come in handy.

He retrieved his rifle and slid it into the scabbard. Then he sat down and lighted a cigarette. Twice in the next hour or so a man came to the saloon door and looked out. Each time he let the cigarette glow brightly.

From where he sat he could see the corner of the water trough in the corral, and a glow caught his eye, for a few minutes he studied it curiously, and then recognized it. The glow was that greenish, phosphorescent light from damp, rotten wood, such as he had often seen in swampy country, or after a period of heavy rains. Many times he had seen branches like that, greenish, ghostly fingers reaching into the darkness.

IT GAVE him another idea and he got to his feet again and walked off a short distance. It was still visible. This would be just the added touch he would need to make his escape effective. He broke off a small bit of the wood and fastened it into the corral post where he had been sitting, and then moved out into the street. The glow was still visible, not so bright as a cigarette, but enough to fool anyone taking a casual glance toward the corral. They were, he was sure, waiting for him to fall asleep.

Once the phosphorescent wood was in place, he moved swiftly. Getting into the saddle, he led the gray horse behind him and moved across the valley toward the Peters cabin where Jennie Lewis lived. Dismounting then, he concealed his horses in the timber, and moved up to the house. A quick glance through the windows, and he saw no one but Jennie, carrying dishes away from the table, and the two older people.

Stepping up to the back door, he tapped gently. There was a moment of silence within, then a question. "Who is it?" At his reply, the door opened and he stepped within.

"We've got to go now," he said quickly. "My horses aren't ready for it, but Spencer's bunch are watching me, and we've got a chance to get away that may give us an hour or so of start."

Joe Peters was staring at him, his face pale. "Hope you make it!" he said. "I hate to think what Spencer will do when we don't tell him you're gone! He's apt to kill us both, or whup us!"

"We'll fix that," Cogar replied. "We'll tie you both. You can say I threw a gun on you."

"Sure!" Peters said. "Sure thing!" He turned to his wife, "Mom, you let me tie you, and then this hombre can tie me."

Jennie had not hesitated. When he spoke she had turned and gone into her room, and now she came out. Startled, he saw she had a pistol belt around her hips.

"Pa's gun," she said, at his question. "It might come in handy!"

They rode swiftly until they reached the edge of the settlement, and then swung around toward where Milt Cogar had left his horses. As they drew alongside, Milt got down to unfasten the ropes that tied them in groups of four. They might have to run, and he wanted nothing to tangle them up.

Suddenly, a dark figure moved from the shadow of the mesquite, and a low voice spoke softly. "I've got you covered. If you move I'll shoot!"

It was not Dan Spencer. But Record, perhaps?

"Who's moving?" he said calmly. "You're doin' a fool thing, buttin' in on this deal."

"Am I?' The man stepped out from the darkness of the mesquite, and Cogar could see his face. The man was slim, wiry and hard jawed. The gun he held brooked no argument. "Anyway, I'm in. Dan Spencer will be pleased to find I've stopped you from gettin' away with his girl."

Milt Cogar held himself very still. There was only one way he could come out of this alive, and it required a gamble with his life at stake. The moment would come. In the meanwhile, he tried the other way, for which he had no hope.

"Folks won't let you steal this girl," he said. 'They'll stand for everything but that."

"They'll stand for that, too," the man said. "Now turn around!"

"Stay where you are!" Jennie's voice was low, penetrating. "Johnny Record, I've got you covered with this Colt. You

drop that gun or I'll kill you!"

Record stiffened, but before he could realize that as long as Cogar was covered there was a stalemate, the girl's voice snapped again.

"You drop that gun before I count three or I'll shoot! One! Two! Thr—"

Her count ended as Record let go of his gun. Milt stepped up and retrieved it. Swiftly then, he spun Record around and tied him tightly, hand and foot.

In the saddle and moving away, he glanced through the darkness toward Jennie. "I reckon as a hero I don't count for much, you gettin' us out of that fix!"

"What else could I do? Anyway, I'd never have had the courage unless you were taking me away like this. With a man to help, I'm brave enough, I guess."

THEY rode on, holding a steady if not fast pace. There was small chance of them losing any pursuit. That would have to be met when it came. He couldn't leave his horses behind, for they were all he had. He might need the money from their sale to help Jennie. She would be friendless and alone.

The desert was wide and white in the moonlight, with only the dark, beckoning fingers of the giant cactuses or the darker blotches of the mesquite, or distant mountains. He turned off the trail he had been following, heading into the canyon country. This would be rough going, but there were places ahead where one might stand off an army.

Foothills crept out into the desert toward them, and they started the horses into a deep draw between two parted arms of hills. The rock walls grew higher and higher, and they lost the light, having only a small rectangle of starlit sky overhead. Milt took no time to rest, but pushed the horses relentlessly, taking no time for anything but getting on.

He knew where he was going, and he knew he must make it by daylight. Jennie said nothing, but he could sense her weariness, judging it to an extent by his own, for her strength would not be equal to his.

Finally, the canyon opened out into a wide flat valley in the mountains, and he moved the horses into the tall grass, giving them no rest, but pushing them diagonally across it. They were mounting toward the far wall of the valley before he drew up.

"We'll stop here, Jennie," he said, "but we daren't have a fire."

He divided the blankets and rolled up in his. In a moment, he was sound asleep. He was unworried about the horses for they would be too tired to go far. The sun on his face awakened him, and he came to a sitting position with a start. Jennie was sitting about a dozen feet away with his rifle across her knees.

Milt stared at her, red faced. "I slept like a tenderfoot!" he said, abashed.

"I'm not used to sleeping out, so I awakened early, that's all. There was no need you being awake. Anyway, they just came into the valley."

"Spencer?"

"Three of them. They came out of the ravine over there and are scouting for our trail. They haven't found it yet."

"Probably not. There's wild horses in this valley and their herd tracks are everywhere." Jennie looked tired but her eyes were bright. "We'll saddle up and get going."

When they were moving again, he hugged the wall of the canyon, knowing they would scarcely be visible against its darkness. They pushed on steadily, and from time to time his eyes strayed to the girl. She rode easily in the saddle, her willowy body yielding to every movement of the horse.

He found he liked having her there. He had never realized how nice it was to know there was someone beside you, somone who mattered. That was the trouble. It was going to be lonesome when she was gone. To avoid that thought, he turned in his saddle and glanced back. They were coming, all three of them, and he had no more than a mile or two of leeway before they would catch up.

Milt's mind was quick, and he knew this valley. The hollow up ahead was the only possible chance. He rode up and turned the horses into it, backing them into the trees along the hillside out of range. Jennie had followed his glance when he looked back, and her face was pale.

When the horses were safely under the trees, he walked back to the crest of the rise. It was a poor place for defense, yet nothing else offered. In the bottom of the hollow one was safely out of range unless

they circled around and got on the mountain behind it. If that happened, there would be small chance for either of them. Still, Milt thought as he nestled down into the grass, there were only three outlaws.

They came on, riding swiftly, and he knew they had seen the two of them ride into the hollow. Jennie moved up beside him.

"I can load your rifle," she whispered, "while you stand them off with the six-guns."

HE NODDED to indicate he understood, and lifted the .44 Winchester. When they were within rifle range, he sighted at them, then took the gun from his shoulder and let them come closer. At last he lifted the rifle again and put a shot into the ground ahead of them. They drew up.

"That won't get you no place!" Spencer roared. "You turn that girl loose and we'll let you go!"

Cogar made no reply, merely waiting. There was some talk down below, and then he called out. "You've come far enough. Don't advance any further!"

One of them, probably Martinez, although Milt could not be sure, wheeled his horse and started for the hollow at a dead run. Milt lifted the rifle and fired.

The rifle leaped in his hand, and Martinez yelled and threw up his hands. He went off the horse as it veered sharply and cut away across the grass. Martinez staggered to his feet and one arm hanging limp, started back toward the other two outlaws.

Cogar let him go. He was not a killer, and wanted only to be let alone.

Four more horsemen were coming up, and were scarcely more than a half mile away. They came on, and drew up with Spencer where they began to talk.

"That makes six of them out there, not counting Martinez," Cogar said. "Looks like we're in for it."

"You could let them have me," Jennie suggested. Her cheek was pillowed on her forearm, and her wide eyes on his face.

He did not take his eyes from them. "Dont' talk foolishness! I said I'd take you away, and I will. My promises are good."

"Is your promise the only reason?"

"Maybe it is and maybe it ain't. Womenfolks always have to see things personal like. If you can be got out of this alive, I'll get you out."

"You know, you're really quite good looking."

"Huh?" He looked around, startled at the incongruous remark. Then as it hit him, he flushed.

"Oh, forget it! Looks ain't gettin' us out of this hole! What I'm afraid of is they'll get somebody on the mountain behind us, or else they'll fire the grass."

"Fire the grass?" Her head jerked up and her face went white. "Oh, no! They wouldn't burn us!"

"That outfit? They'd do anything if they got good and riled."

Some sort of a plan seemed to have been arrived at. Dan Spencer shouted again:

"One more chance! Come out with your hands up and we'll turn you loose! Otherwise we're comin' after you!"

They were barely within rifle range, and Milt Cogar knew the chips were down. His reply was a rifle shot that clipped a white hat from the head of a newcomer. They all hit dirt then.

"I wanted to get him then," Milt muttered. "That wasn't to scare him."

Milt was scared, he admitted to himself. He was as scared as he'd ever been, yet in another way, he wasn't. There was no way out that he could see, and if they fired the grass the only chance was a run for the horses and a wild break in an attempt to out run the attackers, but there was small chance of that working, for there were too many of them. An idea came suddenly.

"You slip back there," he said. "Get the horses down into the hollow. We may have to make a break for it."

She glanced at him quickly, and then without a word, slid back down the slope and got to her feet. He heard a rifle spang, but what happened to the bullet, he didn't know, and then there was a volley and he knew what happened to all the rest. Two whipped by right over his head, and one of them burned him across the shoulders. He rolled over and crept to another position. He could see nothing to shoot at, yet a moment later there was a movement down below, and he fired twice, fast as he could lever the rifle.

The movement stopped, and he rolled over again, getting himself to a new posi-

tion. If they got to the edge of the hollow, he was done for but he couldn't watch all the terrain. A bullet nipped the grass over his head and he fired at the sound.

Stealing a quick glance backward, he saw Jennie coming out of the trees into the hollow with the horses. They seemed disturbed by the firing, and halted not far away.

SPENCER yelled then, and instantly, without replying, Milt snapped a shot at the spot, then one left and one right of it. He heard a startled yelp, but doubted from the sound that his shot had more than burned the renegade.

"Get to your horse but keep your head down!" he warned. "Now listen: we're going out of here, you and I, and fast when we go. We're going to start our horses right down there into the middle of them, and try to crash through. It's a wild chance, but from the way they act, they are scattering out to get all around us. If they do, we won't have much chance. If we run for it now, right at them, they may get us, but we'll have a chance of stampeding their horses."

He swung into the saddle and they turned the herd of fifteen horses toward the enemy, then with whoops and yells, started them on a dead run for Spencer. The rim of the hollow and the tall grass gave them a few precious moments of invisibility, so when the horses went over the rise they were at a dead run.

Milt Cogar, a six-gun in each hand, blazed away over the heads of the horses at the positions of the attackers. He saw instantly that he had been right, for men were already moving off to left and right to surround the hollow, and moving on foot for concealment.

With a thunder of racing hoofs, the horses charged down on Spencer's position, nostrils flaring, manes flowing in the wind of their furious charge.

Milt saw Dan Spencer leap to his feet and throw up a gun, but his shot went wild, and the next instant, he turned and fled. Johnny Record had started to move off to the right, but he turned when he saw the charging horses, and threw his rifle to his shoulder. Cogar snapped a shot at him, and the yells of the men ahead swerved the horses.

There was a moment of startled horror as Record saw death charging upon him, and then he dropped his rifle and started to run. He never made it, and Milt heard his death scream as he went down under the lashing hoofs. And then the herd was racing away down the valley.

"Milt!" Jennie's cry was agonized..

He swung his horse and looked back. The gray had fallen with her, spilling her over on the ground even as she screamed. And running toward her was Dan Spencer.

Milt Cogar's horse was beside her in three bounds and he dropped from the saddle, drawing as he hit ground. His first shot was too quick, and he missed. Spencer skidded to a halt, his face triumphant.

"Now we'll see!" he shouted.

The veins swelled in his forehead, and his eyes were pinpoints of steel. His gun bucked in his hand, and Milt's leg went out from under him, but even as his knee hit ground, he fired. His bullet caught Spencer in the diaphragm, and knocked him back on his heels. Both men fired again, but Dan Spencer's shot bit into the earth just in front of Cogar, and he thumbed his gun, aiming low down at the outlaw's body. Spencer backed up, his jaw working, his eyes fiercely alive, then a bloody froth came to his lips, and Milt, cold and still inside, fired once more. The outlaw's knees gave way and he pitched over on his face.

Milt stared at the fallen man, fumbling at his belt for more cartridges. His fingers seemed very clumsy, but he finally filled the empty chambers. Jennie was hobbling toward him.

"I've sprained my ankle," she said, "but it's nothing!"

She dropped beside him, and gasped when she saw the blood on his trouser leg. "You're hurt!" she exclaimed.

"Not much," he told her. "Who's that coming?"

Her head came up sharply, then her face whitened with relief. "It's Joe Peters! And Thacker!"

The two men walked up, the slender Peters looking even smaller beside the rope girthed bulk of Thacker. Both men had rifles.

"You two all right?" Thacker demanded. The hesitation and fear seemed to have left him. "We hurried after you to help, but we got here late."

"What happened to the other men with Spencer?" Cogar asked.

"The horses got both Martinez and Record. We found one other man dead, one wounded. We kilt one our ownselves, and caught up the rest."

Red came up. "Reckon you started somethin', mister," he said to Milt. "When you took Jennie away so's Spencer couldn't have her, we decided it was right mean of us to let a stranger protect our women. So Thacker here, he seen Joe Peters, and a few others. Then we got together at my eatin' place and started cleanin' the town. We done a good job!"

Thacker grinned, well pleased with himself. "You two can come back if you want," he suggested, "this here deserves a celebration."

"Why, I'd like to come back, sometime," Milt said, "but right now I've got to get my horses down to my own ranch and into pasture there. I'd take Jennie to see the place, if she'll go."

"A ranch might be nice," Jennie said. Her eyes smiled at him, but there was something grave and serious in their depths. "I might like it."

"Only if you come, I might want to keep you," Milt said. "It isn't going to be the same after this."

"Why should it?" Jennie said.

The gray had gotten to his feet and was shaking himself. Milt walked over to him, and his hand trembled as he examined the gelding's legs. When he straightened up, Jennie was facing him, and her lips looked soft and inviting.

"I reckon," Thacker said, pleased, "that we'll have to celebrate without them!"

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 7)

freighters were driving three and four hundred miles for their breadstuffs. Bartles not only pioneered the wheat industry in the state of Oklahoma, which now runs around three hundred million bushels, but he also made the first commercial barrel of wheat flour.

An Empire Builder

He was in reality an empire builder. He started the town of Bartlesville, and practically owned the town of Dewey, which sprang up later only four miles from Bartlesville. He introduced electric lights, sewers and waterworks into the state, and built the present Santa Fe railroad from Caney, Kansas, to Collinsville, Oklahoma, which is about twenty miles south of Bartlesville, and sold it to its present owners.

To Bartles' little empire in the wilds of the Indian Territory, he was with his store and mill what James J. Hill was to the great Northwest—he reclaimed it from the outlaw, the buffalo and the longhorn and made it blossom into a panorama of happy homes.

Fortune smiled on Jake Bartles. He was a much liked man, and the most trusted man in all that section of country—his store was the bank for the frontiersman, the cowman, the freighter. He trusted them all, befriended them all. He knew every man in the country by his first name, and every man knew him as "Jake."

The itinerant minister, the ambitious trapper, the tired freighter, the weary cowpuncher and the bank robber and outlaw with a price on his head, all slept under the same roof under the same conditions, all receiving the same courteous treatment from Jake Bartles. Being a man who knew that many of the newcomers came to the Territory to get away from their pasts, Jake Bartles never questioned any of his guests or neighbors, and he warned strangers not to be too inquisitive.

Curiosity Wasn't Healthy

Right at that time in that section of the country, it was really not healthy to be inquisitive. The fellow who was one's closest neighbor might have been a bad man back in the states. The reason he came to the Territory might have been to dodge the law of his home state. He might even be one of those with a price upon his head, or he might be one who had seen the error of his ways and had come to the new country to start life anew. No matter what it was, fellows did not like to be questioned about their past. If a person had nothing in their past to hide they might talk about it, but if they did not volunteer such information it was considered very impolite to inquire, an impoliteness that might easily lead to trouble.

Jake Bartles practically ruled the entire

section for a large radius, but he ruled with kindness instead of bullying tactics. He seemed to have a knack of making the worst outlaw feel that he was important, a human being entitled to the respect of his fellow man.

While he did not condone evil deeds, he never let on to perpetrators of such deeds that he ever knew they committed them. There were any number of bad men who swore by Jacob Bartles, who would fight for him at the drop of a hat, and no matter how bad they were they seemed to believe that no good would come to them if they molested Jacob Bartles. He never really harbored criminals, but he never tried to run them down.

Jake Bartles built his mill and his general store out of walnut timber, because walnut was the prevailing timber of the section. There was lots of walnut timber but it was not many years before buyers of walnut timber for furniture factories had bought up and had caused most of the walnut timber to be cut down, and now, where walnut was once more than plentiful, it is now scarce. Thirty-seven years after Bartles built his store and mill, the buildings were torn down and the walnut used for the interior work and finishings of his son's home in Dewey.

Reunion at Dewey

Jacob Bartles had been a soldier in the Sixth Kansas cavalry, and after he had made a fortune in raising wheat, and with his store and mill, he practically retired, but he invited the surviving remnant of the regiment to come to Dewey, where he was practically king of all he surveyed, as his guests for a three day reunion. He wanted to see his old comrades again and he wanted to show them a good time.

Nearly all the survivors of the Sixth Kansas came to Dewey for the celebration and Jake Bartles commissioned his son Joe to round up the meanest horses and the wildest cattle to be found in the whole section, and to invite the cowboys from the various ranches in for the three days of cowboy contests which they named the Roundup.

There were cash prizes for the winners and those prizes were paid off in gold coins. W. K. "Bill" Hale of a ranch near Fairfax in the Osage country sixty-five miles from Dewey, was invited by Joe Bartles to come over for the Roundup. The invitation was extended over the phone, the service being such that it took one whole day to get the call through. Bill said: "Why, it will take me a week to make the trip. I'll lose a whole week here at the ranch, because it will take me two days to get over there and two days to get back after the affair is over. I wouldn't do it for anyone else, but if Jake Bartles wants me at his celebration I'll be there."

The Dalton Gang

While Jacob Bartles was busy building an empire in the Indian Territory, there were many outlaws operating in that part of the country. The Dalton Gang was just one of them, but while they committed many depredations they never molested Bartles, yet other parts of the Territory and Kansas just to the north had plenty of trouble at the hands of the noted outlaw gang.

The Osage hills to the west of Dewey, since the earliest days of settlement of that section, has always been known as a hideout for various outlaw gangs and individuals on the dodge from the law. This same Bill Hale, who roped at the first Dewey Roundup, was accused of murdering three people in the Osage and after a long-drawn-out trial was convicted and sentenced to the penitentiary, and just a few years ago was pardoned. But there were just scores of people around that section who never did believe that Hale was guilty. He was such a fine cowboy that it was hard to believe that he could be guilty of murder.

A Plan for Robbery

As late as 1924 I had gone up to Dewey to help with the annual rodeo or Roundup there, when Hugh Amick, connected with a Bartlesville newspaper, who had a pretty close connection with the underworld in gathering news of outlaw depredations, tipped us off that a plan was being formed by a band of outlaws of the Osage Hills to rob the box office of the Roundup.

Upon receiving this tip we went about getting ready for this stickup as quietly as possible, but we really got our artillery ready for action. We had armed men at every conceivable point and had the raid occurred there would sure have been plenty of bloodshed, but it must have been that the outlaw whom the gang had casing the box office was smarter than we thought, or had

some inside information and knew that we had been tipped off and were prepared, for the stickup was not pulled. Even to this day I would not say who tipped us off on the proposed raid for fear some of that gang would try and get revenge upon Hugh Amick, but that grand old newspaper reporter is beyond the vengeance of any robber gang as a few years ago he rode on over the horizon to the great beyond.

Although Jacob Bartles owned some fine horses and the Dalton Gang stole horses through the Indian Territory for mounts on their raids, and while they always picked the best horses, those with speed and stamina, because the difference between a good and a poor or just average horse often meant the difference between life and death, the gang never took any of Bartles' horses. Whether that was an order from the head of the gang or just respect for Bartles will probably never be known.

The Youngest Dalton

Emmett Dalton, the youngest brother and a member of the Dalton gang, was a most likable fellow. I met him at the Dewey Roundup, and knew him for a number of years, and it was really hard to believe that this seemingly fine young fellow was ever an outlaw. He seemed such a cleancut fellow, so affable, and had none of the roughness of bullying tactics that one would expect from an outlaw. Of course, the time that I knew him was after the gang met their Waterloo in the Coffeyville, Kansas, bank raid, when egotistical Grat Dalton wanted to break an outlaw record, wanted to make a reputation greater than that of Jesse James and the James Boys and thought the way to do this was to rob two banks at the same time.

As they were robbing one of the banks the word spread quickly. Citizens with six-shooters and rifles were soon converging upon the bank and from the gunfire from all directions it must have sounded like a regular army was in battle.

The outlaws were being mowed down as they tried to escape from the front doors of the bank, and Bob and Emmett Dalton tried to escape by the back door into the alley. They gained the alley, but the gunfire here was also terrific. A citizen named Charles Brown rushed toward them and Bob Dalton drilled him squarely between the eyes. A

[*Turn page*]

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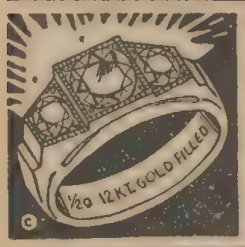

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moment later they were about to reach their horses when Bob went down from gunshot wounds.

A Deed of Bravery

Emmett reached his horse and mounted, and instead of making his escape as he probably could have done, he performed a deed so brave that even though he was an outlaw he won the admiration of people who admire bravery, for Emmett Dalton rode back to where Bob was lying in the alley, reached from his horse and tried desperately to lift or drag his brother upon the horse with him.

It was at this juncture that Emmet was struck in the back with a charge of a shot gun at close range. He released the dying man's hand, reeled in the saddle and fell to the ground. The battle was over. The Dalton Gang was no more. Four outlaws were dead. Emmett Dalton had been captured, with one bullet through his right arm, another through his hip, and a sprinkling of buckshot in his back.

After he had paid his debt to the law, Emmett Dalton was an excellent citizen and finally moved to California where he worked around the movie lots.

Those were turbulent times around the Indian Territory, when Jacob Bartles was working hard to pave the way for civilization and prosperity in what is now one of the most prosperous sections of the great state of Oklahoma, where one can now live in peace without fear of outlaws, thanks to men like Jake Bartles, brave, hard-working pioneers who did so much in the building of our great West. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY

OUR NEXT ISSUE

MURDER in the mountains! Human hyenas on a high lope along the blood trail when the moon is low, and men—good men—are too often asleep. Injustice, greed, cruelty—death stalking the standing timber—another job for the big, salty hombre whom the owlhoot breed hated worse than the devil hates fire engines. The Masked Rider!

High in his hull he rode. High in his proper person as Wayne Morgan, wandering waddy. Higher still with the black cape of

the Masked Rider snapping in the wind of his horse's motion, and the muzzles of his twin .45s wreathed in gunflame. This was a rider to reckon with. This was a man among men.

Some men attract attention as honey draws flies. The Masked Rider and his Indian companion, Blue Hawk, were two of these. In fact, as their latest exploit opens, they were attracting almost too much of it—too much attention from the minions of the law, who thought of the Masked Rider and his aide as dangerous outlaws. Even the Army had a reward notice out for them, up in Washington Territory, and the two Robin Hood riders were heading northward for Canada, for temporary refuge beyond the reach of American law.

But it was not the disposition of Wayne Morgan nor of Blue Hawk to think of their own safety if and when they ran into a situation that needed clearing up. And they ran head on into just such a situation when a cable ferry carrying an Indiana family across the wild waters of the Columbia was cut adrift by renegades who chopped the cables on the far shore.

[*Turn page*]

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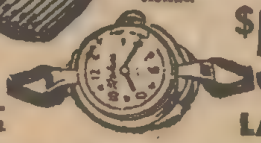

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Wayne Morgan happened to be near, and he was able to save the immigrant group, who would otherwise have been certainly doomed to die. That was the beginning. It's all told in TREASURE IN LEATHER, Walker A. Tompkins' fine complete novel in the next issue of this magazine.

Morgan, having assisted the immigrants and received their earnest thanks, had joined Blue Hawk again and the two fugitives were again headed northward. But something diverted them. Let the author tell it:

They had covered less than a hundred yards from the Conconully road when they were startled by a high-pitched scream wafting through the timber ahead of them.

"Cougar," muttered Blue Hawk, sitting tense in saddle.

Morgan shook his head.

"Cougars don't scream this time of day. Sounded like a human being to me—one in mortal agony."

The anguished voice reached them again, choking off at the top of its crescendo, its tortured tones putting a chill down Morgan's back.

"Somebody's in trouble over yonder," the cowboy said, picking up his reins. "Let's have a look."

Somebody in trouble! That was all it took to make Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk forget themselves and go spurring to the rescue. Somebody—some decent person or persons—in trouble. Help them—and to the devil with the consequences!

So—

They spurred forward, trailed by Midnight and the pinto. A moment later they were reining up at the edge of a clearing, on the opposite side of which they glimpsed the ribbon of the Conconully road.

A shake-roofed log cabin was built in the center of the clearing, a wisp of smoke spiraling from its rock chimney. Two saddle horses were grazing in the bluestem beyond the cabin.

Another agonized shriek lashed their eardrums, and they knew instantly that it came from inside the cabin. Someone there was in the throes of some torturing agony.

With one accord, Blue Hawk and Wayne Morgan spurred forward, the strike of their horses' hoofs ringing on the rock slabs of the clearing floor. The front door of the cabin was on the opposite side of the building, facing the Conconully road. Only a narrow window broke the log face of the rear wall which the two riders were approaching.

Morgan yelled a warning as he saw sunlight glint off the barrel of a rifle which jutted suddenly from that window. Even as he flung himself from saddle, flame spat from the bore of the Winchester, and a slug drilled its sightless path through space which Morgan's body had occupied a moment before.

Blue Hawk wheeled his *grulla* and spurred into the sheltering timber even as Morgan, gun palmed, sprinted at a low crouch for the shelter of a nearby boulder. A second bullet from the cabin spat gravel in his face as Morgan dived behind the rock.

The Yaqui snaked a carbine from his saddle boot and drove a bullet toward the window from the concealment of the brush. An instant later they heard a drumming of booted feet on the front porch of the cabin.

From the angle of their concealment, neither Blue Hawk nor Morgan could see the two saddle horses at the far edge of the clearing. But a moment later they heard a drumming of hoofs as two riders left the clearing and hammered off up the road toward the mining camps.

What Morgan found in that cabin was enough to make his blood boil!

A red-bearded oldster, stripped to the waist, was writhing in ropes which bound him to a chair in front of the fireplace. His scrawny body was welted with ugly blisters. One glance at the red-hot poker jutting from the hearth embers told Morgan that this old timer had been subjected to inhuman torture.

Morgan freed the semi-conscious man, carried him to a buffalo-robed bunk, revived him momentarily with whiskey from a jug he found in the cabin. It was a trapper's cabin, and the man's waist-length whiskers recalled to Morgan the description Adrian Bonesteel, the immigrant on the ferry, had given him of a brother he was seeking in these parts. This, he was sure, was Giff Bonesteel. His guess was confirmed when the oldster spoke.

"They was tryin'—to force me to tell—where me an' my brother Jepp—hid the silver," the trapper husked out. "They was goin'—to kill me—same as they killed Jepp—last winter."

Nausea assailed Wayne Morgan as he realized that this oldster was dying. His flesh was charred in a dozen places by the hot poker. The pulse in his skinny wrist was feeble, ebbing.

This was Adrian Bonesteel's brother, of that Morgan was now positive. His reference to a brother named Jepp was proof of that.

"Listen, Giff," Morgan cried urgently, giving the dying trapper another pull from the whiskey jug. "You've got to hang on. Your brother from Indiana is on his way here. His wagon's coming up the road—"

Giff Bonesteel's eyes rolled in their sockets. The whiskey had taken hold of him, roused his flagging vitality. But when he spoke, it was in the incoherent gibberish of delirium.

"Secret of our silver cache—is in Jepp's brain," Bonesteel choked out, his arms and legs threshing on the buffalo hide blanket under him. "Redrock Canyon—find the silver skull. Silver skull—"

[*Turn page*]

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A paroxysm of agony wracked the trapper's half naked form, and his twisting muscles suddenly went still. Wayne Morgan leaned over him, thumbed back an eyelid. Then he lifted the trapper's red beard and bent an ear to the oldster's bony chest. He knew then that life was extinct.

A shadow fell across the doorway behind Morgan and he whirled about, hand stabbing to gun butt. Two men stood framed in the doorway there, and guns jutted from their fists. On the gallus strap of one of them glinted the silver star of a lawman.

"Get 'em up fast, stranger," growled the star-toter. "It looks like we got here in time to witness a murderer in the act!"

Okay, hombres and hombresses, we're not going to take the edge off this grand story for you by telling you what happened next. You'll find it all in the next issue!

But TREASURE IN LEATHER isn't the only swell yarn in that book. There'll be Allan K. Echols' stirring novelette, THE FATHER OF THE MAN. Ruck Doggett had done young Wade Worden a favor, and so, when the authorities threw Doggett in jail on a murder charge, Worden figured it was up to him to do something about it. So he sprung Doggett, helped him escape, believing without question that Doggett was a good hombre, and innocent of the charge against him.

What happened? Plenty! That's for you to read, and enjoy. So are the short stories, the departments, and such. All comin' up, in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. A gala number!

OUR LETTER BOX

AND now let's have a look at that fat file of letters and cards from you, and you, and you, all the gents and girls up and down the land who now and then "take pen in hand" to tell us what you think of MASKED RIDER WESTERN, the stories and articles therein, and why. If you yourself have not written us, what are you waiting for? The mails are running, and no dollar-an-ounce of Pony Express days, either. Or was it five dollars an ounce? Anyhow, inscribe an epistle—that's Park Avenue for dash off a letter, you know—and let us hear from you. As did those from whom we quote excerpts below.

One reason I like MASKED RIDER WESTERN is because I would rather ride a fast horse than eat. I can also use a rifle pretty well. I am what you might call a western girl in Mississippi.

Don't tell Morgan's life story. Keep him mysterious. He's more interesting that way.—*Stella Allen, West, Miss.*

I wish to correct an article in which the author, Bill Anson, told how Chief Roman Nose met his fate in a battle which occurred in Kansas. I'd like to inform Mr. Anson he is off his home base in locating the Battle of Beecher Island in Kansas. The battle was in Yuma County, Colorado. I have visited this battle-ground many times, and have listened to stories told by survivors. I have pictures of the monument erected by Colorado and Kansas, which were taken before the 1935 flood that washed it away.

Survivors told us that when help for the beleaguered men arrived, the Indians gathered their dead and departed in a southwesterly direction. Their next watering place was on the Republican River in Kit Carson County, near what later became the Pugh ranch, where survivor Jack Stillwell visited many times and declared the wagon wheel rock formation laid on the top of a high bluff was the grave of the famed warrior, Roman Nose.—*D. Hendricks, Burlington, Colorado.*

Why doesn't the Masked Rider, as Wayne Morgan, ever go out with a girl? Of course, he wouldn't have to be in love with her, but, gee, isn't he human at all? And why do the stories never mention anything about how Wayne Morgan became the Masked Rider? Can't you tell us just a little of his life story? You ask for our likes and dislikes. Well, here's mine.—*Jean Shiflett, Snell, Virginia.*

I have just finished LURE OF THE GUN TRAILS, by Chuck Martin. It was tops. Chuck Martin is a very good writer and I would like to read more stories written by him and Gunnison Steele.—*Allen Hunter, Oklahoma City, Okla.*

Do you mind if a lady gives her opinion? My husband and I read MASKED RIDER WESTERN as often as we can find the book on the newsstands. We like it just like it is, so don't change it.—*(Mrs.) Jerry B. Cox, Louisville, Ky.*

Please, the next story you write about the Masked Rider, tell about his past—how he and Blue Hawk became partners, and when and why he became the Masked Rider. I surely would like the answer. Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk are wonderful.—*Dessie Anderson, Norge, Virginia.*

All for this time, folks. Let's know what more of you think about the questions brought up in this batch of missives. Be seein' yuh. Meantime please write us. Just address The Editor, Masked Rider Western, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Whether we print your letter or not, we'll enjoy it and appreciate your writing. A postcard will do. So long, and thanks.

—THE EDITOR.

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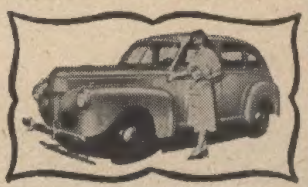

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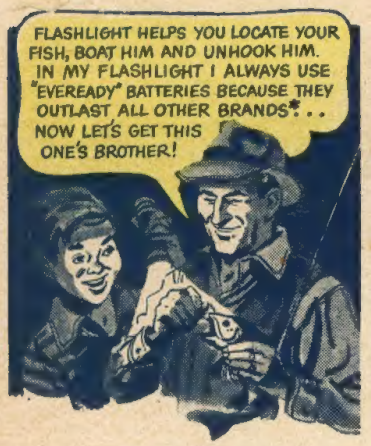
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